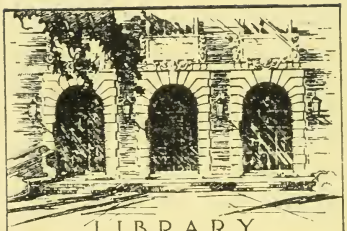

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MITCHELHURST PLACE

VOL. I.

MITCHELHURST PLACE

A Novel

BY

MARGARET VELEY

AUTHOR OF "FOR PERCIVAL"

"Que voulez-vous? Hélas! notre mère Nature,
Comme toute autre mère, a ses enfants gâtés,
Et pour les malvenus elle est avare et dure!"

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

London

MACMILLAN AND CO.

1884

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TO

BARBARA'S BEST FRIEND

ELFRIDA IONIDES

HER STORY IS MOST AFFECTIONATELY

AND GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED.

Gunnis Ray 28 Apr '42 Chulut = 2v.

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MITCHELHURST PLACE

CHAPTER I.

TREASURES DROPPED AND PICKED UP.

"Dans l'air pâle, émanant ses tranquilles lumières
Rayonnait l'astre d'or de l'arrière-saison."

THERE was nothing remarkable in the scene. It was just a bit of country lane, cut deeply into the side of a hill, and seamed with little pebbly courses, made by the streams of rain which had poured across it on their downward way. The hill-side faced the west, and, standing on this ledge as on a balcony, one might look down into a valley where cattle were feeding in the pastures, and where a full and softly-flowing

river turned the wheel of a distant mill, and slipped quietly under the arched bridge of the lower road. Sometimes in summer the water lay gleaming, like a curved blade, in the midst of the warm green meadows, but on this late October day it was misty and wan, and light vapours veiled the pale globe of the declining sun. Looking upward from the valley, a broad slope of ploughed land rose above the road, and the prospect ended in a hedge, a gate, through whose bars one saw the sky, and a thin line of dusky, red-trunked firs. But from the road itself there was nothing to be seen in this direction except a steep bank. This bank was crowned with hawthorn bushes, and here and there a stubborn stunted oak, which held its dry brown leaves persistently, as some oaks do. With every passing breath of wind there was a crisp rustling overhead.

This bit of road lay deserted in the faint yellow gleams. But for a wisp of straw,

caught on an overhanging twig, and some cart-tracks, which marked the passage of a load, one might have fancied that the pale sun had risen, and now was about to set, without having seen a single wayfarer upon it. But there were four coming towards it, and, slowly as two of them might travel, they would yet reach it while the sunlight lasted. The little stage was to have its actors that afternoon.

First there appeared a man's figure on the crest of the hill. He swung himself over the gate, and came with eager strides down the field, till he reached the hedge which divided it from the road. There he stopped, consulted his watch, and sheltering himself behind one of the little oaks, he rested one knee on a mossy stump, and thus, half-standing, half-kneeling, he waited. The attitude was picturesque, and so was the man. He had bright grey-blue eyes, hair and moustache brown, with a touch of

reddish gold, a quick, animated face, and a smiling mouth. It was easy to see that he was sanguine and fearless, and on admirable terms with himself and the world in general. He was young, and he was pleasant to look at, and, though he could hardly have dressed with a view to occupying that precise position, his brown velvet coat was undeniably in the happiest harmony with the tree against which he leaned, and the withered foliage above his head.

To wait there, with his eyes fixed on that unfrequented way, hardly seemed a promising pastime. But the young fellow was either lucky or wise. He had not been there more than five minutes by his watch, when a girl turned the corner, and came, with down-bent head, slowly sauntering along the road below him. His clasping hand on the rough oak-bark shifted slightly, to allow him to lean a little further and gain a wider range, though he was careful

to keep in the shelter of his tree and the hawthorn hedge. A few steps brought the girl exactly opposite his hiding-place. There she paused.

She sauntered because her hands and eyes were occupied, and she took no heed of the way she went. She paused because her occupation became so engrossing that she forgot to take another step. She wore long, loose gloves, to guard her hands and wrists, and as she came she had pulled autumn leaves of briony and bramble, and brier sprays with their bunches of glowing hips. These she was gathering together and arranging, partly that they might be easier to carry, and partly to justify her pleasure in their beauty by setting it off to the best advantage. As she completed her task, a tuft of yellow leaves on the bank beside her caught her eye. She stretched her hand to gather it, and the man above looked straight down into her unconscious upturned face.

She was not more than eighteen or nineteen, and by a touch of innocent shyness in her glances and movements she might have been judged to be still younger. She was slight and dark, with a soft loose cloud of dusky hair, and a face, not flower-like in its charm, but with a healthful beauty more akin to her own autumn berries—ripe, clear-skinned, and sweet. As she looked up, with red lips parted, it was hardly wonderful that the lips of the man in ambush, breathlessly silent though he was, made answer with a smile. She plucked the yellow leaves and turned away, and he suffered his breath to escape softly in a sigh. Yet he was smiling still at the pretty picture of that innocent face held up to him.

It was all over in a minute. She had come and gone, and he stood up, still cautiously, lest she should return, and looked at the broad brown slope down

which he had come so eagerly. Every step of that lightly-trodden way must be retraced, and time was short. But even as he faced it he turned for one last glance at the spot where she had stood. And there, like coloured jewels on the dull earth, lay a bunch of hips, orange and glowing scarlet, which she had unawares let fall. In a moment he was down on the road, had caught up his prize, and almost as quickly had pulled himself up again, and was standing behind the sheltering tree while he fastened it in his coat. And when he had secured it, it seemed, after all, as if he had needed just that touch of soft bright colour, and would not have been completely himself without it.

"Barbara's gift," he said to himself, looking down at it. "I'll tell her of it one of these days, when the poor things are dead and dry! No, that they never shall be!" He quickened his pace. "They

shall live, at any rate, for me. It would not be amiss for a sonnet. *Love's Gleaning* —yes, or *Love's Alms*," and before the young fellow's eyes rose the dainty vision of a creamy, faintly-ribbed page, with strong yet delicately-cut Roman type and slim italics. Though not a line of it was written, he could vaguely see that sonnet in which his rosy spoil should be enshrined. He could even see Barbara reading it, on some future day, while he added the commentary, which was not for the world in general, but for Barbara. It became clearer to him as he hurried on, striking across the fields to reach his destination more directly. Snatches of musical words floated on the evening air, and he quickened his pace unconsciously as if in actual pursuit. To the east the sky grew cold and blue, and the moon, pearl white, but as yet not luminous, swam above him as he walked.

So the poet went in quest of rhymes,

and Barbara, strolling onward, looked for leaves and berries. She had not gone far when she spied some more, better, of course, than any she had already gathered. This time they were on the lower bank which sloped steeply downward to a muddy ditch. Barbara looked at them longingly, decided that they were attainable, and put her nosegay down on the damp grass that she might have both hands free for her enterprise.

She was certain she could get them. She leaned forward, her finger-tips almost brushed them, when a man's footsteps, close beside her, startled her into consciousness of an undignified position, and she sprang back to firmer ground. But a thin chain she wore had caught on a thorny spray. It snapped, and a little gold cross dropped from it, and lay, rather more than half-way down, among the briers and withered leaves. She snatched at the dangling chain, and

stood, flushed and disconcerted, trying to appear absorbed in the landscape, and unconscious of the passer-by who had done the mischief. If only he *would* pass by as quickly as possible, and leave her to regain her treasure and gather her berries!

But the steps hesitated, halted, and there was a pause—an immense pause—during which Barbara kept her eyes fixed on a particular spot in the meadow below. It appeared to her that the eyes of the unknown man were fixed on the back of her head, and the sensation was intolerable. After a moment, however, he spoke, and broke the spell. It was a gentleman's voice, she perceived, but a little forced and hard, as if the words cost him something of an effort.

"I—I beg your pardon, but can I be of any service? I think you dropped something—ah! a little cross." He came to her side. "Will you allow me to get it for you?"

Barbara went through the form of glancing at him, but she did not meet his eyes. "Thank you," she said, "but I needn't trouble you, really." And she returned to her pensive contemplation of that spot where the meadow grass grew somewhat more rankly tufted.

He paused again before speaking. It seemed to Barbara that this young man did nothing but pause. "I don't think you can get it," he said, looking at the brambles. "I really don't think you can."

If Barbara had frankly uttered her inmost sentiments she would have said, "Great idiot—no—not if you don't go away!" But, as it was, she coloured yet more in her shyness, and stooped to pick up her nosegay from the ground. He had been within an inch of treading on it.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed, starting back. "How clumsy of me!"

Something in his tone disarmed her. She

feared that she had been ungracious, and moreover she was a little doubtful whether she would not find it difficult to regain her trinket without his help. "You haven't done any harm," she said. Then, glancing downward, "Well, if you will be so kind."

The new-comer surveyed the situation so intently that Barbara took the opportunity of surveying him.

She was familiar, in novels, with heroes and heroines who were not precisely beautiful, yet possessed a nameless and all-conquering charm. Perhaps for that very reason she was slow to recognize good looks where this charm was absent. The tall young fellow who stood a few steps away, gazing with knitted brows at the little wilderness of briers, was really very handsome, but he was not certain of the fact. Beauty should not be self-conscious, but it should not despondently question its own existence. This man seemed to be accustomed to a

chilly, ungenial atmosphere, to be numbed and repressed, to lack fire. Barbara fancied that if he touched her his hand would be cold.

In point of actual features he was decidedly the superior of the young fellow who was climbing the hill-side, but the pleasant colour and grace were altogether wanting. Yet he was not exactly awkward. Neither was he ill-dressed, though his clothes did not seem to express his individuality, except perhaps by the fact that they were black and grey. Any attempt at description falls naturally into cold negatives, and the scarlet autumn berries which were just a jewel-like brightness in the first picture would have been a strange and vivid contrast in the second.

His momentary hesitation on the brink of his venture was not in reality indecision, but the watchful distrust produced by a conviction that circumstances were hostile. He wished to take them all into account.

Having briefly considered the position of the cross, and the steepness of the bank, he stepped boldly down. In less than half a second the treacherous earth had betrayed him; his foot slipped, he fell on his back, and slid down the short incline to the muddy ditch at the bottom, losing his hat by the way.

Barbara, above him, uttered a silvery little "Oh!" of dismay and surprise. She was not accustomed to a man who failed in what he undertook.

The victim of the little accident was grimly silent. With a scrambling effort he recovered his footing and lost it again. A second attempt was more successful; he secured the cross, clambered up, and restored it to its owner, turning away from her thanks to pick up his hat, which luckily lay within easy reach. Barbara did not know which way to look. She was painfully, burningly conscious of his evil plight.

His boots were coated with mire, his face was darkly flushed and seamed with a couple of brier scratches, a bit of dead leaf was sticking in his hair, and "Oh," thought Barbara, "he cannot possibly know how muddy his back is!"

She stood, turning the little cross in her fingers. "Thank you very much," she said nervously. "I should never have got it for myself."

"Are you quite sure?" he asked, with bitter distinctness. "I think you would have managed it much better."

"I'm sure I would rather not try." She dared not raise her eyes to his face, but she saw that he wore no glove, and that the thorns had torn his hand. He was winding his handkerchief round it, and the blood started through the white folds. "Oh, you have hurt yourself!" she exclaimed. He answered only with an impatient gesture of negation.

"How am I to thank you?" she asked despairingly.

"Don't you think the less said the better, at any rate for me?" he replied, picking a piece of bramble from his sleeve, and glancing aside, as if to permit her to go her way with no more words.

But Barbara held her ground. "I should have been sorry to lose that cross. I—I prize it very much."

"Then I am sorry to have given you an absurd association with it."

"Please don't talk like that. I shall remember your kindness," said the girl hurriedly. She felt as if she must add something more. "I always fancy my cross is a kind of—what do they call those things that bring good luck?"

"Amulet? Talisman?"

"Yes, a talisman," she repeated, with a little nod. "It belonged to my godmother. I was named after her. She died before I

was a year old, but I have heard my mother say she was the most beautiful woman she ever saw. Oh, I should hate to lose it!"

"Would your luck go with it?" He smiled as he asked the question, and the smile was like a momentary illumination, revealing the habitual melancholy of his mouth.

"Perhaps," said Barbara.

"Well, you would not have lost it this afternoon, as it was quite conspicuously visible," he rejoined.

By this time he had brushed his hat, and, passing his hand over his short waves of dark hair, had found and removed the bit of leaf which had distressed Barbara. She advanced a step, perhaps emboldened a little by that passing smile. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she said, "but when you slipped you got some earth on your coat." (She fancied that "earth" sounded a little more dignified than "mud" or "dirt," and

that he might not mind it quite so much.) "Please let me brush it off for you." She looked up at him with a pleading glance and produced a filmy little feminine handkerchief.

He eyed her, drawing back. "No!" he ejaculated; and then, more mildly, "No, thank you. I can manage. No, thank you."

"I wish——" Barbara began, but she said no more, for the expression of his face changed so suddenly that she looked over her shoulder to discover the cause.

A gentleman stood a few steps away, gazing at them in unconcealed surprise. A small, neat, black-clothed gentleman, with bright grey eyes and white hair and whiskers, who wore a very tall hat and carried a smart little cane.

"Uncle!" the girl exclaimed, and her uplifted hand dropped loosely by her side.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED INVITATION.

THE old gentleman's face would have been a mere note of interrogation, but for a hint of chilly displeasure in its questioning. The young people answered with blushes. The word was the same for both, but the fact was curiously different. The colour that sprang to Barbara's cheek was light and swift as flame, while the man at her side reddened slowly, as if with the rising of a dark and sullen tide, till the lines across his face were angrily swollen. The bandage, loosely wound round his hand, showed the wet stains, and the new-comer's bright gaze, travelling downwards, rested

on it for a moment, and then passed on to the muddy boots and trousers.

"Uncle," said Barbara, "I dropped my gold cross, and this gentleman was so kind as to get it back for me."

"It was nothing—I was very glad to be of any service, but it isn't worth mentioning," the stranger protested, again with a rough edge of effort in his tone.

"On the contrary," said the old gentleman, "I fear my niece has given you a great deal of trouble. I am sure we are both of us exceedingly obliged to you for your kindness." He emphasised his thanks with a neat little bow. To the young man's angry fancy it seemed that his glance swept the landscape, as if he sought some perilous precipice, which might account for the display of mud and wounds.

"Yes," said Barbara quickly, "the bank is so slippery, and there are such horrid brambles—look, uncle! I came to meet

you, and I was gathering some leaves, and my chain caught and snapped."

"Ah! that bank! Yes, a very disagreeable place," he assented, looking up at the stranger. "I am really very sorry that you should have received such——" he hesitated for a word, and then finished, "such injuries."

"The bank is nothing. I was clumsy," was the reply.

"I think, Barbara, we must be going home," her uncle suggested. The young man stood aside to let them pass, with a certain awkwardness and irresolution, for their road was the same as his own.

"I beg your pardon," he said, abruptly, "but perhaps, if you are going that way, you can tell me how far it is to Mitchelhurst."

They both looked surprised. "About a mile and a half. Were you going to Mitchelhurst?"

"Yes, but if you know it——"

"We live there," said Barbara.

"Perhaps you could tell me what I want to know. I would just as soon not go on this afternoon. Is there a decent inn, or, better still, could one be tolerably sure of getting lodgings in the place, without securing them beforehand?"

"You want lodgings there?"

"Only for a few days. I came by train a couple of hours ago"—he named a neighbouring town—"and they told me at the hotel that it was uncertain whether I should find accommodation at Mitchelhurst; so I left my luggage there, and walked over to make inquiries."

"I do not think that I can recommend the inn," said the other, doubtfully. "I fear you would find it beery, and smoky, and noisy—the village ale-house, you understand. Sanded floors, and rustics with long clay pipes—that's the kind of thing at the 'Rothwell Arms.'"

"Ah! the 'Rothwell Arms'!"

"And as for lodgings," the old man continued, with something alert and watchful in his manner, "the fact is people *don't* care to lodge in Mitchelhurst. They live there, a few of them—myself for instance—but there is nothing in the place to attract ordinary visitors."

He paused, but the only comment was—

"Indeed?"

"Nothing whatever," he affirmed. "A little, out-of-the-way, uninteresting village—but you are anxious to stay here?"

The stranger was re-arranging the loosened handkerchief with slender, unskilful fingers.

"For a few days—yes," he repeated, half absently, as he tried to tuck away a hanging end.

"Uncle," said Barbara, with timid eagerness, "doesn't Mrs. Simmonds let lodgings? When that man came surveying, or some-

thing, last summer, didn't he have rooms in her house? I'm very nearly sure he did."

Her uncle intercepted, as it were, the stranger's glance of inquiry.

"Perhaps. But I don't think Mrs. Simmonds will do on this occasion."

"Why not?" the other demanded. "I don't suppose I'm more particular than the man who came surveying. If the place is decently clean, why not?"

"Because your name is Harding. I don't know what his might happen to be."

The young man drew himself up, almost as if he repelled an accusation. Then he seemed to recollect himself.

"Yes," he said, "it is. How did you know that?"

The little Mitchelhurst gentleman found such pleasure in his own acuteness that it gave a momentary air of cordiality to his manner.

"My dear sir," he replied, looking critic-

ally at Harding's scratched face, "I knew the Rothwells well. I recognise the Rothwell features."

"You must be a keen observer," said the other curtly.

"Voice too," the little man continued. "Especially when you repeated the name of the inn—the Rothwell Arms."

Harding laughed.

"Upon my word! The Rothwells have left me more of the family property than I was aware of."

"Then there was your destination. Who but a Rothwell would ever want to stay at Mitchelhurst?"

"I see. I appear to have betrayed myself in a variety of ways." The discovery of his name seemed to have given him a little more ease of manner of a defiant and half-mocking kind. "What, is there something more?" he inquired, as his new acquaintance recommenced, "And then——"

"Yes, enough to make me very sure. You wear a ring on your little finger which your mother gave you. She used to wear it thirty years ago."

"True!" said Harding, in a tone of surprise. "You knew my mother then?"

"As I say—thirty years ago. She is still living, is she not? And in good health, I trust?"

"Yes." The young man looked at his ring. "You have a good memory," he said, with an inflection which seemed to convey that he would have ended the sentence with a name, had he known one.

The little gentleman took the hint.

"My name is Herbert Hayes." He spoke with careful precision, it was impossible to mistake the words, yet there was something tentative and questioning in their utterance. The young man's face betrayed a puzzled half-recognition.

"I've heard my mother speak of you," he said.

"But you don't remember what she said?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. It is very stupid of me. But that I have heard her speak of you I'm certain. I know your name well."

"There was nothing much to say. We were very good friends thirty years ago. Mrs. Harding might naturally mention my name if she were speaking of Mitchelhurst. Does she often talk of old days?"

"Not often. I shall tell her I met you."

Barbara stood by, wondering and interested, glancing to and fro as they spoke. At this moment she caught her uncle's eye.

"By the way," he said, "I have not introduced you to my niece—my great-niece, to be strictly accurate—Miss Barbara Strange."

Harding bowed ceremoniously, and yet

with a touch of self-contemptuous amusement. He bowed, but he remembered that she had seen him slide down a muddy bank on his back by way of an earlier introduction.

"Mr. Rothwell Harding, I suppose I should say?" the old man inquired.

"No. I'm not named Rothwell. I'm Reynold Harding."

"Reynold?"

"Yes. It's an old name in my father's family. That is," he concluded, in the dead level of an expressionless tone, "as old a name as there is in my father's family, I believe."

"I suppose his grandfather was named Reynold," said Mr. Hayes to himself. Aloud he replied, "Indeed. How about Adam?"

Harding constrained himself to smile, but he did it with such an ill grace that Mr. Hayes perceived that he was a stupid

prig, who could not take a joke, and gave himself airs.

"About these lodgings?" the young man persisted, returning to the point. "If Miss Strange knows of some, why won't they do for me?"

Mr. Hayes gulped down his displeasure.

"There is only one roof that can shelter you in Mitchelhurst," he said magnificently, and that is the roof of Mitchelhurst Place."

"Of Mitchelhurst Place?" Reynold was taken by surprise. He made a little step backward, and Barbara, needlessly alarmed, cried, "Mind the ditch!" Her impulsive little scream nearly startled him into it, but he recovered himself on the brink, and they both coloured again, he angrily, she in vexation at having reminded him of his mishap. "How can I go to Mitchelhurst Place?" he demanded in his harshly hurried voice.

"As my guest," said Mr. Hayes. "I am Mr. Croft's tenant. I live there—with my niece."

The young man's eyes went from one to the other. Barbara's face was hardly less amazed than his own.

"Oh thank you!" he said at last. "It's exceedingly good of you, but I couldn't think of troubling you—I really couldn't. The lodgings Miss Strange mentioned will do very well for me, I am sure, or I could manage for a day or two at the inn."

"Indeed—" Mr. Hayes began.

"But I am not particular," said Harding with his most defiant air and in his bitterest tone, "I assure you I am not. I have never been able to afford it. I shall be all right. Pray do not give the matter another thought. I'm very much obliged to you for your kindness, but it's quite out of the question, really."

"No," said Mr. Hayes, resting his little

black kid hands on the top of his stick and looking up at the tall young man, "it is out of the question that you should go anywhere else. Pray do not suggest it. You intended to go back to your hotel this evening and to come on to Mitchelhurst to-morrow? Then let us have the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow as early as you like to come."

"Indeed — indeed," protested Harding, "I could not think of intruding."

The little gentleman laughed.

"My dear sir, who is the intruder at Mitchelhurst Place? Answer me that! No," he said, growing suddenly serious, "you cannot go to the pot-house—you—your mother's son—while I live in the Rothwells' old home. It is impossible—I cannot suffer it. I should be for ever ashamed and humiliated if you refused a few days' shelter under the old roof. I should indeed."

"If you put it so——"

"There is no other way to put it."

"I can say no more. I can only thank you for your kindness. I will come," said Reynold Harding, slowly. Urgent as the invitation was, and simply as it was accepted, there was yet a curious want of friendliness about it. Circumstances constrained these two men, not any touch of mutual liking. One would have said that Mr. Hayes was bound to insist and Harding to yield.

"That is settled then," said the elder man, "and we shall see you to-morrow. I am a good deal engaged myself, but Barbara is quite at home in Mitchelhurst, and can show you all the Rothwell memorials—the Rothwells are the romance of Mitchelhurst, you know. She'll be delighted to do the honours, eh, Barbara?"

The girl murmured a shy answer.

"Oh, if I trespass on your kindness I

think that's enough; I needn't victimise Miss Strange," said the young man, and he laughed a little, not altogether pleasantly. "And I can't claim any of the romance. My name isn't Rothwell."

"The name isn't everything," said Mr. Hayes. "Come, Barbara, it's getting late, and I want my dinner. Till to-morrow, then," and he held out his hand to their new acquaintance.

Young Harding bowed stiffly to Barbara. "Till to-morrow afternoon."

The old man and the girl walked away, he with an elderly sprightliness of bearing which seemed to say, "See how active I still am!" she moving by his side with dreamy, unconscious grace. They came to a curve in the road, and she turned her head and looked back before she passed it. Mr. Reynold Harding had taken but a couple of steps from the spot where they had left him. He had apparently arranged

his bandage to his satisfaction at last, and was pulling at the knot with his teeth and his other hand, but his face was towards them, and Barbara knew that he saw that backward glance. She quickened her steps in hot confusion, and looked straight before her for at least five minutes.

During that time it was her uncle who was the hero of her thoughts. His dramatic recognition of Harding and Harding's ring, his absolute refusal to permit the young man to go to any house in Mitchelhurst but the Place, something in the tone of his voice when he uttered his "thirty years ago," hinted a romance to Barbara. The conjecture might or might not be correct, but at any rate it was natural. Girls who do not understand love are apt to use it to explain all the other things they do not understand. She waited till her cheeks were cool, and her thoughts clear, and then she spoke.

"I didn't know you knew the Rothwells so well, uncle."

"My dear," said her uncle, "how should you?"

"I suppose you might have talked about them."

"I might," said Mr. Hayes. "Now you mention it, I might, certainly. But I haven't any especial fancy for the gossip of the last generation."

"Well, I have," said the girl. And after a moment she went on. "How long is it since they left the Place?"

Her uncle put his head on one side with a quick, birdlike movement, and apparently referred to a cloud in the western sky before he made answer.

"Nineteen years last Midsummer."

"And when did you take it?"

"A year later."

The two walked a little way in silence, and then Barbara recommenced.

"This Mr. Harding—he is like the Rothwells, then?"

"Rothwell from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. The old people, who knew the family, will find him out as he walks through the village—see if they don't. The same haughty, sulky, sneering way with him, and just the same voice. Only every Rothwell at the Place, even to the last, had an air of being a *grand seigneur*, which this fellow can't very well have. Upon my word, I begin to think it was the pleasantest thing about them. I don't like a pride which is conscious of being homeless and out at elbows."

Barbara undauntedly pursued her little romance.

"You are talking about the men," she said. "Is Mr. Harding like his mother?"

"Well, she was a handsome woman," Mr. Hayes replied indifferently, "but she had the same unpleasant manner."

The girl was thrown back on an utter blankness of ideas. A woman beloved may have a dozen faults, and be the dearer for them; but she cannot possibly have an unpleasant manner. Barbara could frame no theory to fit the perplexing facts.

As they turned into the one street of Mitchelhurst, Mr. Hayes spoke musingly.

"To-morrow afternoon, Barbara, let that young man have the blue room—the large room. You know which I mean?"

"Yes, uncle."

"See that everything is nice and in order. And, Barbara——"

"Yes, uncle," said Barbara again, for he paused.

"Mr. Reynold Harding will probably look down on you. I suspect he thinks that you and I are about fit to black his boots. Be civil, of course, but you needn't do it."

"I'm sure I don't want," said the girl quietly; "and at that rate I should hope he would come with them tolerably clean to-morrow."

Mr. Hayes laughed suddenly, showing his teeth.

"By Jove!" he said, "they were dirty enough this afternoon!"

"In my service," said Barbara. "Now I come to think of it, it seems to me that I ought to clean them."

"Nonsense!" her uncle exclaimed, still smiling at the remembrance. "And you saw him roll into the ditch?—Barbara, the poor fellow must hate you like poison!"

She looked down as she walked, drawing her delicate brows a little together.

"I dare say he does," she said softly, as if to herself.

Between ten and eleven that evening Mr. Reynold Harding sat by his fireside, staring

at the red coals as they faded drearily into ashes. Being duly washed and brushed, he showed but slight traces of his accident. The scratches on his face were not deep, and his torn hand was mended with little strips of black plaster. Intently as he seemed to think, his thoughts were not definite. Had he been questioned concerning them he could have answered only "Mitchelhurst." Anger, tenderness, curiosity, pride, and bitter self-contempt were mixed in silent strife in the shadows of his soul. The memory of the Rothwells had drawn him on his pilgrimage — a vain, hopeless, barren memory, and yet the best he had. He had intended to wander about the village, to look from a distance at the Rothwells' house, to stand by the Rothwells' graves in the churchyard, and to laugh at his own folly as he did so. And now he was to sleep under their roof, to know the very rooms where they had lived

and died, and for this he was to thank these strangers who played at hospitality in the old home. He thought of the morrow with curious alternations of distaste and eagerness.

Mr. Hayes, meanwhile, with the lamplight shining on his white hair, was studying a paper in the Transactions of the County Archæological Society, "On an Inscription in Mitchelhurst Church." Mr. Hayes had a theory of his own on the subject, and smiled over the vicar's view with the tranquil enjoyment of unalloyed contempt.

And Barbara, in the silence of her room, opposite a dimly-lighted mirror, sat brushing her shadowy hair, whose waves seemed to melt into the dusk about the pale reflection of her face. As she gazed at it she was thinking of some one who was gone, and of some one who was to come. Dwelling among the old memories of

Mitchelhurst Place, her girlish thoughts had turned to them for lack of other food, till the Rothwells were real to her in a sense in which no other fancies ever could be real. She was so conscious that her connection with the house was accidental and temporary, that she felt as if it still belonged to its old owners, and she was only their guest. They were always near, yet, whimsically enough, in point of time they were nearest when they were most remote. Barbara's phantoms mostly belonged to the last century, and they faded and grew pale as they approached the present day, till the latest owner of the Place was merely a name. The truth was that at the end of their reign the Rothwells, impoverished and lonely, had simply lived in the house as they found it, and were unable to set the stamp of any individual tastes upon their surroundings. They were the Rothwells of the good old

times who left their autographs in the books in the library, their patient needlework on quilts and bell-pulls, their mouldering rose-leaves in great china jars, their pictures still hanging on the walls, and traces of their preferences in the names of rooms and paths. There were inscriptions under the bells that had summoned servants long ago, which told of busy times and a full house. The lettering only differed from anything in the present day by being subtly and unobtrusively old-fashioned. "MR. GERALD" and "MR. THOMAS" had given up ringing bells for many a long day, and if the one suspended above MISS SARAH'S name sometimes tinkled through the stillness, it was only because Barbara wanted some hot water. Miss Sarah was one of the most distinct of the girl's phantoms. Rightly or wrongly, Barbara always believed her to be the beautiful Miss Rothwell of whom an old man in

the village told her a tradition, told to him in his boyhood. It seemed that a Rothwell of some uncertain date stood for the county ("and pretty nigh ruined himself," said her informant, with a grim, yet admiring, enjoyment of the extravagant folly of the contest), and in the very heat of the election Miss Rothwell drove with four horses to the polling-place, to show herself clothed from head to foot in a startling splendour of yellow, her father's colour.

"They said she was a rare sight to see," the old man concluded meditatively.

"And did Mr. Rothwell get in?" asked Barbara.

"No, no!" he said, shaking his head. "No Rothwell ever got in for the county, though they tried times. But he pretty nigh ruined himself."

Had she cared to ask her uncle, Barbara might very possibly have ascertained the

precise date of the election, and identified the darkly beautiful girl who was whirled by her four spirited horses into the roaring, decorated town. But she was not inclined to talk of her fancies to Mr. Hayes. So, assuming the heroine to be Miss Sarah, she remained in utter ignorance concerning her after life. Did she ever wear the white robes of a bride, or the blackness of widow's weeds? Barbara often wondered. But at night, in her room, which was Sarah Rothwell's, she could never picture her otherwise than superbly defiant in the meteor-like glory of that one day.

As she brushed her dusky cloud of hair that evening she called up the splendour of her favourite vision, and then her thoughts fell sadly away from it to Reynold Harding, the man who had kindred blood in his veins, but no inheritance of name or land. Those iron horse-hoofs, long ago, had thundered over the bit of road

where Barbara gathered her autumn nosegay, and where young Harding—oh, poor fellow!—slipped in the mire, and scrambled awkwardly to his feet, a pitiful, sullen figure to put beside the beautiful Miss Rothwell.

Was she glad he was coming? She laid down her brush and mused, looking into the depths of her mirror. Yes, she was glad. She did not think she should like him. She felt that he was hostile, scornful, dissatisfied. But Mitchelhurst was quiet—so few people ever came to it, and if they *did* come they went away without a word—and at eighteen quiet is wearisome, and a spice of antagonism is refreshing. Did he hate her as her uncle had said? Time would show. She took her little cross from the dressing table, and looked at it with a new interest. No, she did not like him. "But, after all," said Barbara to herself, "he is a

Rothwell, and my fairy godmother introduced us!"

Many miles away a bunch of hips, scarlet and orange, lay by a scribbled paper. They had had adventures since they were pulled from a Mitchelhurst brier that afternoon. They had been lost and found, and travelling by rail had nearly been lost again. A clumsy porter, shouldering a load, had blundered against an absorbed young man, who was just grasping a rhyme; and the red berries fell between them to the dusty platform, and were barely saved from perils of hurrying feet. Still, though a little bruised and spoilt, they glowed ruddily in the candle-light, and the paper beside them said—

"*Speech was forbidden me; I could but stay,*
Ambushed behind a leafless hawthorn screen,
And look upon her passing. She had been
To pluck red berries on that autumn day,
And Love, who from her side will never stray,
Stole some for pity, seeing me unseen,

And sighing, let them fall, that I might glean—
'Poor gift,' quoth he, 'that Time shall take away!'
Nay, but I mock at Time! It shall not be
That, fleet of foot, he robs me of my prize;
Her smile has kindled all the sullen skies,
Blessed the dull furrows, and the leafless tree,
And year by year the autumn, ere it dies,
Shall bring my rosy treasure back to me!"

CHAPTER III.

"WELCOME TO MITCHELHURST PLACE."

Mitchelhurst was, as Mr. Hayes had said, a dull little village, by no means likely to attract visitors. It was merely a group of houses, for the most part meanly built, set in a haphazard fashion on either side of a wide road. Occasionally a shed would come to the front, or two or three poplars, or a bit of garden fence. But the poplars were apt to be mercilessly lopped, with just a tuft at the extreme tip, which gave each unlucky tree a slight resemblance to a lion's tail, and the gardens, if not full of cabbages, displayed melancholy rows of stumps where cabbages had been. There was very little traffic through Mitchelhurst

Street, as this thoroughfare was usually called, yet it showed certain signs of life. Fowls rambled aimlessly about it, with a dejected yet inquiring air, which seemed to say that they would long ago have given up their desultory pecking if they could have found anything else to do. A windmill, standing on a slight eminence a little way from the road, creaked as its sails revolved. Sounds of hammering came from the blacksmith's forge. Children played on the foot-path, a little knot of loungers might generally be seen in front of the "Rothwell Arms," and at most of the doorways stood the Mitchelhurst women, talking loudly while their busy fingers were plaiting straws. This miserably paid work was much in vogue in the village, where generation after generation of children learned it, and grew up into stunted, ill-fed girls, fond of coarse gossip, and of their slatternly independence.

At the western end of the village, beyond the alehouse, stood the church, with two or three yews darkening the crowded graveyard. The vicarage was close at hand, a sombre little house, with a flagged path leading to its dusky porch. Mitchelhurst was not happy in its vicars. The parish was too small to attract the heroic enthusiasts who are ready to live and die for the unhealthy and ignorant crowds of our great cities. And the house was too poor, and the neighbourhood too uninteresting, for any kindly country gentleman, who chanced to have "the Reverend" written before his name, to come and stable his horses, and set up his liberal house-keeping, and preach his Sunday sermons there. No one chose Mitchelhurst, so "those few sheep in the wilderness" were left to those who had no choice, and the vicars were almost always discontented elderly men. As a rule they died there, a vicar of Mitchelhurst

being seldom remembered by the givers of good livings. The incumbent at this time was a feeble archæologist, who coughed drearily in his damp little study, and looked vaguely out at the world from a narrow and mildewed past. As he stepped from the shadowy porch, blinking with tired eyes, he would pause on the path, which looked like a row of flat unwritten tombstones, and glance doubtfully right and left. Probably he had some vague idea of going into the village, but in nine cases out of ten he turned aside to the graveyard, and sauntered musingly in the shadow of the old yews, or disappeared into the church, where there were two or three inscriptions just sufficiently defaced to be interesting. He fancied he should decipher them one day, and leave nothing for his successor to do, and he haunted them in that hope.

When he went into the street he spoke kindly to the women at the doors, with an

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obvious forgetfulness of names and circumstances which made him an object of contemptuous pity. They could not conceive how any one in his senses could make such foolish mistakes, and were inclined to look on the Established Church as a convenient provision for weak-minded gentlefolks. They grinned when he had gone by, and repeated his well-meant inquiries, plaiting all the time. It was only natural that the vicar should prefer his parishioners dead. They did not then indulge in coarse laughter, they never described unpleasant ailments, and they were neatly labelled with their names, or else altogether silent concerning them.

The vicar's shortcomings might have been less remarked had the tenants of Mitchelhurst Place taken their proper position in the village. But where, seventy or eighty years before, the great gates swung open for carriages and horses, and busy servants,

and tradesmen, there came now down the mossy drive only an old man on foot, and a girl by his side, with eyes like dark waters, and a sweet richness of carnation in her cheeks. Mr. Hayes and his niece lived, as the later Rothwells had lived, in a corner of the old house. It was queer that a man should choose to hire a place so much too big for him, people said, but they had said it for nineteen years, and they never seemed to get any further. Herbert Hayes might be eccentric, but he was shrewd, he knew his own business, and the villagers recognised the fact. He was not popular, there was nothing to be got by begging at the Place, and he would not allow Barbara to visit any of the cottages. But it was acknowledged that he was not stingy in payment for work done. And if he lived in a corner he knew how to make himself comfortable there, which was more than the last Rothwell had been able to do.

The church and vicarage were at one end of Mitchelhurst, and the Place, which stood on slightly rising ground, was at the other. It was a white house, and in a dim light it had a sad and spectral aspect, a pale blankness as of a dead face. The Rothwell who built it intended to have a stately avenue from the great ironwork gates to the principal entrance, and planted his trees accordingly. But the site was cruelly exposed, and the soil was sterile, and his avenue had become a vista of warped and irregular shapes, leaning in grotesque attitudes, dwarfed and yet massive with age. In the leafiness of summer much of this singularity was lost, but when winter stripped the boughs it revealed a double line of fantastic skeletons, a fit pathway for the strangest dreams.

The gardens, with the exception of a piece close to the house, had been so long neglected that they seemed almost to have

forgotten that they had ever been cultivated. Almost, but not quite, for they had not the innocence of the original wilderness. There were tokens of a contest. The plants and grasses that possessed the soil were obviously weeds, and the degraded survivals of a gentler growth lurked among them overborne and half strangled. There was a suggestion of murderous triumph in the coarse leaves of the mulleins and docks that had rooted themselves as in a conquered inheritance, and the little undulations which marked the borders and bits of rock-work of half a century earlier looked curiously like neglected graves.

It seemed to Barbara Strange, as she stood looking over it all, on the day on which Mr. Harding was to come to Mitchelhurst, that there was something novel in this aspect of desolation. She knew the place well, for it was rather more than a year since she came, at her uncle's invita-

tion, to live there, and she had seen it with all the changes of the seasons upon it. She knew it well, but she had never thought of it as home. The little Devonshire vicarage which held father and mother, and a swarm of young sisters and brothers—almost too many to be contained within its walls—was home in the past and the present. And if the girl had dreams of the future, shy dreams which hardly revealed themselves even to her, they certainly never had Mitchelhurst Place for a background. To her it was just a halting-place on her journey into the unknown regions of life. It was like some great out-of-the-way ruinous old inn, in which one might chance to sleep for a night or two. She had merely been interested in it as a stranger, but on this October day she looked at it curiously and critically for Mr. Harding's sake. She would have liked it to welcome him, to show some signs of stately hospitality to

this son of the house who was coming home, and for the first time a full sense of its dreariness and hopelessness crept into her soul. She could do nothing, she felt absurdly small, the great house seemed to cast a melancholy shadow over her, as she went to and fro in the bit of ground that was still recognised as a garden, gathering the few blossoms that autumn had spared.

Barbara meant the flowers to brighten the rooms in which they lived, but she looked a little doubtfully into her basket while she walked towards the house. They were so colourless and frail, it seemed to her that they were just fit to be emptied out over somebody's grave. "Oh," she said to herself, "why didn't he come in the time of roses, or peonies, or tiger lilies? If it had been in July there might have been some real sunshine to warm the old place. Or earlier still, when the apple blossom was out — why didn't he come

then? It is so sad now." And she remembered what some one had said, a few weeks before, loitering up that wide path by her side: "An old house—yes, I like old houses, but this is like a whited sepulchre, somehow. And not his own—I should not care to set up housekeeping in a corner of somebody else's sepulchre." Barbara, as her little lonely footsteps fell on the sodden earth, thought that he was perfectly right. She threw back her head, and faced the wide, blind gaze of its many-windowed front. Well, it *was* Mr. Harding's own family sepulchre, if that was any consolation.

Her duty as a housekeeper took her to the blue room, which Mr. Hayes had chosen for their guest, a large apartment at the side of the house, not with the bleak northern aspect of the principal entrance, but looking away towards the village, and commanding a wide prospect of meadow land.

The landscape in itself was not remarkable, but it had an attraction as of swiftly varying moods. Under a midsummer sky it would lie steeped in sunshine, and dappled with shadows of little, lightly-flying clouds, content and at peace. Seen through slant lines of grey rain it was beyond measure dreary and forlorn, burdening the gazer's soul with its flat and unrelieved heaviness. One would have said at such times that it was a veritable Land of Hopelessness. Then the clouds would part, mass themselves, perhaps, into strange islands and continents, and towering piles, and the sun would go down in wild splendours of flame as of a burning world, and the level meadows would become a marvellous plain, across which one might journey into the heart of unspeakable things. Then would follow the pensive sadness of the dusk, and the silvery enchantment of moonlight. And after all these changes there would probably

come a grey and commonplace morning, in which it would appear as so many acres of very tolerable grazing land, in no wise remarkable or interesting.

Barbara did not trouble herself much about the prospect. She was anxious to make sure that soap and towels had been put ready for Mr. Harding, and candles in the brass candlesticks on the chimney-piece, and ink and pens on the little old-fashioned writing-table. With a dainty instinct of grace she arranged the heavy hangings of the bed, and, seeing that a clumsy maid had left the pillow awry, she straightened and smoothed it with soft touches of a slender brown hand, as if she could sympathetically divine the sullen weariness of the head that should lie there. Then, fixing an absent gaze upon the carpet, she debated a perplexing question in her mind.

Should she, or should she not, put

some flowers in Mr. Harding's room? She wanted to make him feel that he was welcome to Mitchelhurst Place, and, to her shyness, it seemed easier to express that welcome in any silent way than to put it into words. And why not? She might have done it without thinking twice about it, but her uncle's little jests, and her own loneliness, while they left her fearless in questions of right and wrong, had made her uneasy about etiquette. As she leaned against one of the carved pillars of the great bed, musing, with lips compressed and anxious brow, she almost resolved that Mr. Reynold Harding should have nothing beyond what was a matter of housewifely duty. Why should she risk a blush or a doubt for him? But even with the half-formed resolution came the remembrance of his unlucky humiliation in her service, and Barbara started from her idle attitude, and went away, singing softly to herself.

When she came back she had a little bowl of blue and white china in her hands, which she set on the writing-table near the window. It was filled with the best she could find in her basket—a pale late rose-bud, with autumnal foliage red as rust (and the bud itself had lingered so long, hoping for sunshine and warmth, that it would evidently die with its secret of sweetness folded dead in its heart), a few heads of mignonette, green and run to leaf, and rather reminding of fragrance than actually breathing it; a handful of melancholy Michaelmas daisies, and two or three white asters. The girl, with warm young life in her veins, and a glow of ripe colour on her cheek stooped in smiling pity and touched that central rosebud with her lips. No doubt remained, if there had been any doubt till then—it was already withered at the core, or it must have opened wide to answer that caress.

"Don't tell me!" said Barbara to herself with a little nod. "If such a drearily doleful bouquet isn't strictly proper, it ought to be!"

It was late in the afternoon before the visitor came. There was mist like a thin shroud over the face of the earth, and little sparks of light were gleaming in the cottage windows. Reynold Harding held the reins listlessly when the driver got down to open the great wrought-iron gate, and then resigned his charge as absently as he had accepted it. He stared straight before him while the dog-cart rattled up the avenue, and suffered himself to sway idly as they bumped over mossy stones in the drive. The trees, leaning overhead, dropped a dead leaf or two on his passive hands, as if that were his share of the family property held in trust for him till that moment.

There was something coldly repellent in the stony house front, where was no sign

of greeting or even of life. The driver alighted again, pulled a great bell which made a distant clangour, and then busied himself at the back of the cart with Harding's portmanteau, while the horse stood stretching its neck, and breathing audibly in the chilly stillness. There was a brief pause, during which Harding, who had not uttered a word since he started, confronted the old house with a face as neutral as its own.

Then the door flew open, a maid appeared, the luggage was carried into the hall, and Mr. Hayes came hurrying out to meet his guest. "Welcome to Mitchelhurst Place!" he exclaimed. That "Welcome to Mitchelhurst Place!" had been in his thoughts for a couple of hours at least, and now that it was uttered it seemed very quickly over. Harding, who was paying the driver out of a handful of change, dropped a couple of coins, made a hurried attempt to regain

them, and finally shook hands confusedly with Mr. Hayes, while the man and the maid pursued the rolling shillings round their feet. "Thank you — you are very kind," he said, and then saw Barbara in the background. She had paused on the threshold of a firelit room, and behind her the warm radiance was glancing on a bit of white-panelled wall. Reynold hastily got rid of his financial difficulties and went forward.

"Oh, what a cold drive you must have had!" she cried, when their hands met. "You are like ice! Do come to the fire."

"We thought you would have been here sooner," said Mr. Hayes. "The days draw in now, and it gets to be very cold and damp sometimes when the sun goes down."

Harding murmured something about not having been able to get away earlier.

"This isn't the regular drawing-room, you know," his host explained. "I like

space, but there is a little too much of it in that great room—you must have a look at it to-morrow. I don't care to sit by my fire-side and see Barbara at her piano across an acre or two of carpet. To my mind this is big enough for two or three people."

"Quite," said Reynold.

"The yellow drawing-room they called this," the other continued.

The young man glanced round. The room was lofty and large enough for more than the two or three people of whom Mr. Hayes had spoken. But for the ruddy firelight it might have looked cold, with its cream-white walls, its rather scanty furniture, and the yellow of its curtains and chairs faded to a dim tawny hue. But the liberal warmth and light of the blazing pile on the hearth irradiated it to the furthest corner, and filled it with wavering brightness.

"It's all exactly as it was in your uncle's

time," said Mr. Hayes. "When he could not go on any longer, Croft took the whole thing just as it stood, with all the old furniture. But for that I would not have come here."

"All the charm would have been lost, wouldn't it?" said Barbara.

"The charm — yes. Besides, one had need be a millionnaire to do anything with such a great empty shell. I suspect a millionnaire would find plenty to do here as it is."

"I suppose it had been neglected for a long while?" Reynold questioned with his hard utterance.

Mr. Hayes nodded, arching his brows.

"Thirty or forty years. Everything allowed to go to rack and ruin. By Jove, sir, your people must have built well, and furnished well, for things to look as they do. Well, they shall stay as they are while I am here; I'll keep the wind and the

rain out of the old house, but I can do no more, and I wouldn't if I could. And when I'm gone, Croft, or whoever is master then, must see to it."

"Yes," said the young man, still looking round. "I'm glad you've left it as it used to be."

"Just as your mother would remember it. Except, of course, one must make oneself comfortable," Mr. Hayes explained apologetically. "Just a chair for me, and a piano for Barbara, you see!"

Reynold saw. There was a large eastern rug spread near the fire-place, and on it stood an easy-chair, and a little table laden with books. A shaded lamp cast its radiance on a freshly-cut page. By the fire was a low seat, which was evidently Barbara's.

"That's the way to enjoy old furniture," said Mr. Hayes. "Sit on a modern chair and look at it—eh? There's an old piano

in that further corner; that's very good to look at too."

"But not to hear?" said Harding.

"You may try it."

"That's more than I may do," said Barbara, demurely.

"You tried it too much—you tried me too much," Mr. Hayes made answer. "You did not begin in a fair spirit of investigation. You were determined to find music in it."

The girl laughed and looked down.

"And I did," she murmured to herself.

"Ah, you are looking at the portraits," Mr. Hayes went on. "There are better ones than the two or three we have here. I believe your Uncle John took away a few when he left. Your grandmother used to hang over there by the fireplace. The one on the other side is good, I think—Anthony Rothwell. You must come a little more this way to look at it."

Harding followed obediently, and made various attempts to find the right position, but the picture was not placed so as to receive the full firelight, and being above the lamp it remained in shadow.

"Stay," said the old gentleman, "I'll light this candle."

He struck a match as he spoke, and the sudden illumination revealed a scornful face, and almost seemed to give it a momentary expression, as if Anthony, of Mitchelhurst Place, recognised Reynold of nowhere.

The younger man eyed the portrait coldly and deliberately.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Anthony Rothwell, my grandfather, I suppose?"

"Great-grandfather," Mr. Hayes corrected.

"Oh, you are well acquainted with the family history. Well, then, I should say that my great-grandfather was remarkably handsome, but——"

"If it comes to that you are uncommonly

like him," said his host, with a little chuckle, as he looked from the painted face to the living one, and back again.

Reynold started and drew back.

"Oh, thank you!" he said, with a short laugh. If he had been permitted to continue his first remark, he would have said, "but as unpleasant-tempered a gentleman as you could find in a day's journey."

The words had been so literally on his lips that he could hardly realise that they had not been uttered when Mr. Hayes spoke.

For the moment the likeness had been complete. Then he saw how it was, laughed, and said—

"Oh, thank you."

But he flashed an uneasy glance at Barbara, who was lingering near. Was he really like that pale, bitter-lipped portrait? He fancied that her face would tell him, but she was looking fixedly at Anthony Rothwell.

"Mind you are not late for dinner, Barbara," said her uncle quickly.

She woke to radiant animation.

"*I* won't be," she said. "But if you are going to introduce Mr. Harding to all the pictures first——"

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind."

"That's right. Mr. Harding's ancestors won't spoil if they are kept waiting a little, but I can't answer for the fish."

"Pray don't let any dead and gone Rothwells interfere with your dinner," said Reynold. "If one's ancestors can't wait one's convenience, I don't know who can."

CHAPTER IV.

DINNER AND A LITTLE MUSIC.

BARBARA was the first to reappear in the yellow drawing-room. She had gone away, laughing carelessly; she came back shyly, with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes. She had put on a dress which was reserved for important occasions, and she was conscious of her splendour. She felt the strings of amber beads that were wound loosely round her throat, and that rose and fell with her quickened breathing. Nay, she was conscious to the utmost end of the folds of black drapery, that followed her with a soft sound, as of a summer sea, when she crossed the pavement of the hall. For

Barbara's dress was black, and its special adornment was some handsome black lace that her grandmother had given her. Something of lighter hue and texture might have better suited her age, but there was no questioning the fact that the dignified richness of her gown was admirably becoming to the girl. One hardly knew whether to call her childish or stately, and the perplexity was delightful.

Her heart was beating fast, half in apprehension and half in defiance. Over and over again while she waited she said to herself that she had *not* put on her best dress for Mr. Harding's sake, she had *not*. She did not care what he thought of her. He might come and go, just as other people might come and go. It did not matter to her. But his coming seemed somehow to have brought all the Rothwells back to life, and to have revealed the desolate pride of the old house. When she looked from

Reynold's face to Anthony's, she suddenly felt that she must put on her best dress for their company. It was no matter of personal feeling, it was an instinctive and imperative sense of what the circumstances demanded. She had never been to such a dinner party in all her life.

The feeling did her credit, but it was difficult to express. Feelings are often difficult to express, and a woman has an especial difficulty in conveying the finer shades of meaning. There is an easy masculine way of accounting for her every action by supposing it aimed at men in general, or some man in particular; and thus all manner of delicate fancies and distinctions, shaped clearly in a woman's mind, may pass through the distorting medium to reach a man's apprehension as sheer coquetry. The knowledge of this possibility is apt to give even innocence an air of hesitating consciousness. Barbara was by no means certain that her

uncle would understand this honour paid, not to any living young man, but to the traditions of Mitchelhurst Place, and her blushes betrayed her shame at his probable misreading of her meaning. And what would Mr. Harding himself think?

He came in with his languid, hesitating walk, looking very tall and slender in his evening dress. He had telegraphed home for that dress suit the day before. The fact that he was travelling for a week or two, with no expectation of dining anywhere but in country inns, might naturally have excused its absence, but the explanation would have been an apology, and Harding could not apologise. He would have found it easier to spend his last shilling. Perhaps, too, he had shared Barbara's feeling as to the fitness of a touch of ceremony at Mitchelhurst.

At any rate he shared her shyness. He crossed the room with evident constraint,

and halted near the fire without a word. Barbara's shyness was palpitating and aflame; his was leaden and chill. She did not know what to make of his silence; she waited, and still he did not speak; she looked up and felt sure that his downcast eyes had been obliquely fixed on her.

"Uncle is last, you see," she said. "I knew he would be."

"I was afraid I might be," he replied. "A clock struck before I expected it. I suppose my watch loses, but I hadn't found it out."

"Oh, I ought to have told you," she exclaimed penitently. "That is the great clock in the hall, and it is always kept ten minutes fast. Uncle likes it for a warning. So when it strikes, he says, 'That's the hall clock; then there's plenty of time, plenty of time, I'll just finish this.' And he goes on quite happily."

"I fancied somehow that Mr. Hayes was a very punctual man."

"Because he talks so much about it. I think he reminds other people for fear they should remind him. When I first came he was always saying, 'Don't be late,' till I was quite frightened lest I should be. I couldn't believe it when he said, 'Don't be late,' and then wasn't ready."

"You are not so particular now?"

"Oh yes, I am," she answered very seriously. "It doesn't do to be late if you are the house-keeper, you know."

A faint gleam lighted Harding's face.

"Of course not; but I never was," he replied, in a respectful tone. "How long is it since you came here?"

"I came with my mother to see uncle a great many years ago, but I only came to live here last October. Uncle wanted somebody. He said it was dull."

"I should think it was. Isn't it dull for you?"

"Sometimes," said Barbara. "It isn't at all like home. That's a little house with a great many people in it—father and mother, and all my brothers and sisters, and father's pupils. And this is a big house with nobody in it."

"Till you came," said Reynold, hesitating over the little bow or glance which should have pointed his words.

"Well, there's uncle," said Barbara with a smile, "he must count for somebody. But *I* feel exactly like nobody when I am going in and out of all those empty rooms. You must see them to-morrow."

The clock on the chimney-piece struck, and she turned her head to look at it. "*That's* five minutes slow," she said.

"And the other was more than ten minutes fast."

"Yes, it gains. Do you know," said Barbara, "I always feel as if the great clock were *the* time, so when it fairly runs away

into the future and I have to stop it, to let the world come up with it again, it seems to me almost as if I stopped my own life too."

"Some people would be uncommonly glad to do that," said Harding; "or even to make time go backward for a while."

"Well, I don't mind for a quarter of an hour. But I don't want it to go back, really. Not back to pinafores and the schoolroom," said Barbara with a laugh, which in some curious fashion turned to a deepening flush. The swift, impulsive blood was always coming and going at a thought, a fancy, a mere nothing.

Harding smiled in his grim way. "I suppose it's just as well *not* to want time to run back," he said at last.

"Uncle might find himself punctual for once if it did. Oh, here he comes!" The door opened as she spoke, and Mr. Hayes appeared on the threshold with an inquiring face.

"Ah! you are down, Barbara! That's right. Dinner's ready, they tell me."

Reynold looked at Barbara, hesitated, and then offered his arm. Mr. Hayes stood back and eyed them as they passed—the tall young man, pale, dark-browed, scowling a little, and the girl at his side radiantly conscious of her dignity. Even when they had gone by he was obliged to wait a moment. The sweeping folds of Barbara's dress demanded space and respect. His glance ran up them to her shoulders, to the amber beads about her neck, to the loose coils of her dusky hair, and he followed meekly with a whimsical smile.

They dined in the great dining-room, where a score of guests would have seemed few. But they had a little table, with four candles on it, set near a clear fire, and shut in by an overshadowing screen. "We are driven out of this in the depth of winter," said Mr. Hayes. "It is too cold—nothing

seems to warm it, and it is such a terrible journey from the drawing-room fire. But till the bitter weather comes I like it, and I always come back as soon as the spring begins. We were here by March, weren't we, Barbara?"

The girl smiled assent, and Harding had a passing fancy of the windy skies of March glancing through the tall windows, the upper part of which he saw from his place. But his eyes came back to Barbara, who was watching the progress of their meal with an evident sense of responsibility. The crowning grace of an accomplished housekeeper is to hide all need of management, but this was the pretty anxiety of a beginner. "Mary, the currant jelly," said Miss Strange in an intense undertone, and glanced eloquently at Reynold's plate. She was so absorbed that she started when her uncle spoke.

"Why do you wear those white things—

asters, are they not? They don't go well with your dress."

Barbara looked down at the two colourless blossoms which she had fastened among the folds of her black lace. "No, I know they don't, but I couldn't find anything better in the garden to-day."

"It wouldn't have mattered what it was," Mr. Hayes persisted, with his head critically on one side. "Anything red or yellow—just a bit of colour, you know."

"But that was exactly what I couldn't find. All the red and yellow things in the garden are dead."

"Why not some of those scarlet hips you were gathering yesterday?" said Reynold.

"Oh! Those!" exclaimed Barbara, looking hurriedly away from the scratch on the cheek nearest her, and then discovering that she had fixed her eyes on his wounded hand. "Do you think they would have done? Well, yes, I dare say they might."

"I should think they would have done beautifully, but you know best. Perhaps you did not care for them? You threw them away?" He was smiling with a touch of malice, as if he had actually seen Barbara in her room, gazing regretfully at a little brown pitcher which was full of autumn leaves and clusters of red rose-fruit.

"Of course they would have done," said Mr. Hayes.

"Yes, perhaps they might. I must bear them in mind another time. Uncle, Mr. Harding's plate is empty." And Barbara went on with her dinner, feeling angry and aggrieved. "He might have let me think I had spared his feelings by giving them up," she said to herself. "It would have been kinder. And I should like to know what I was to do. If I had worn them he would have looked at me to remind me. I can't think what made uncle talk about the stupid things."

During the rest of the meal conversation was somewhat fitful. The three, in their sheltered, fire-lit nook, sat through pauses, in which it almost seemed as if it would be only necessary to rise softly and glance round the end of the screen to surprise some ghostly company gathered silently at the long table. The wind made a cheerless noise outside, seeking admission to the great hollow house, and died away in the hopelessness of vain endeavour. At last Miss Strange prepared to leave the gentlemen to their wine, but she lingered for a moment, darkly glowing against the background of sombre brown and tarnished gold, to bid her uncle remember that coffee would be ready in the drawing-room when they liked to come for it.

Mr. Hayes pushed the decanter to his guest. "Where is John Rothwell now?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Harding, listlessly.

He was peeling a rough-coated pear, and he watched the long, unbroken strip gliding downward in lengthening curves. "Somewhere on the Continent—in one of those places where people go to live shabbily."

Mr. Hayes filled the pause with an inquiring "Yes?" and his bright eyes dilated.

"Yes," the other repeated. "Didn't you say he took some pictures away with him? They must be all gone long ago—pawned or sold. How would you raise money on family portraits? It would look rather queer going to the pawnbroker's with an ancestor under your arm."

"But there was his mother's portrait. He would not——"

"Hm!" said Harding, cutting up his pear. "Well, perhaps not. Perhaps he had to leave in a hurry some time or other. A miniature would have been more convenient."

"But this is very sad," said Mr. Hayes. He spoke in an abstract and impersonal manner.

Harding assented, also in a general way.

"Very sad," the other repeated. Then, quickening to special recollection—"And your uncle was always such a proud man. I never knew a prouder man than John Rothwell five-and-twenty years ago. And to think that he should come to this!"

He leaned back in his chair and slowly sipped his wine, while he tried to reconcile old memories with this new description. The wine was very good, and Mr. Hayes seemed to enjoy it. Reynold Harding rested his elbow on the table, and looked at the fire with a moody frown.

"Some pride can't be carried about, I suppose," he said at last. "It's as bad as a whole gallery of family portraits—worse, for you cannot raise money on it."

Mr. Hayes nodded. "I see. Rooted in

the Mitchelhurst soil, you think? Very possibly." He looked round, as far as the screens permitted. "And so, when this went, all went. But how very sad!"

The young man did not take the trouble to express his agreement a second time.

"And your other uncle," said Mr. Hayes briskly, after a pause. "How is he?"

"My other uncle?"

"Yes, your uncle on your father's side—Mr. Harding."

"Oh, he is very well—getting to be an old man now."

"But as prosperous as ever?"

"More so," said Harding in his rough voice. "His money gathers and grows like a snowball. But he is beginning to think about enjoying it—he is evidently growing old. He says it is time for him to have a holiday. He never took one for some wonderful time—eighteen years I think it

was; but he has not worked quite so hard of late."

"Well, he deserves a little pleasure now."

"I don't know about that. If a man makes himself a slave to money-getting I don't see that he deserves any pleasure. He deserves his money."

The old gentleman laughed. "Let the poor fellow amuse himself a little—if he can. The question is whether he can, after a life of hard work. What is his idea of pleasure?"

"Yachting. He discovered quite lately that he wasn't sea-sick; he hadn't leisure to find it out before. So he took to yachting. He can enjoy his dinner as well on board a boat as anywhere else, he can talk about his yacht, and he can spend any amount of money."

"You haven't any sympathy with his hobby?"

"I? I've no money to spend, and I *am* sea-sick."

"You are? I remember now," said Mr. Hayes, thoughtfully, "that your grandfather and John Rothwell had a great dislike to the water."

"Ah? It's a family peculiarity? A proud distinction?" Harding laughed quietly, looking away. He was accustomed to laugh at himself and by himself. "It's something to be able to invoke the Rothwell ancestry to give dignity to one's qualms," he said.

Mr. Hayes smiled a little unwillingly. He did not really require respect for the Rothwell sea-sickness, but it hardly pleased him that the young fellow should scoff at his ancestry, just when it had gained him admission to Mitchelhurst Place. "Bad taste," he said to himself, and he returned abruptly to the money-making uncle. "I suppose Mr. Harding has a son to come after him?"

"Yes, there's one son," Reynold replied, with a contemptuous intonation.

"And does he take to the business?"

"I don't know much about that. I fancy he wants to begin at the yachting end, anyhow."

"Only one son." Mr. Hayes glanced at young Harding as if a question were on his lips; but the other's face did not invite it, and the subject dropped. There was a pause, and then the elder man began to talk of some Roman remains which had been discovered five miles from Mitchelhurst. Reynold crossed his long legs, balanced himself idly, and listened with dreary acquiescence.

It was some time before the Roman remains were disposed of and they rejoined Barbara. They startled her out of her uncle's big easy-chair, where she was half-lying, half-sitting, with all her black draperies about her, too much absorbed in

a novel to hear their approach. Harding, on the threshold, caught a glimpse of the nestling attitude, the parted lips, the hand that propped her head, before Miss Strange was on her feet and ready for her company.

Mr. Hayes, stirring his coffee, demanded music. He liked it a little for its own sake, but more just then because it would take his companion off his hands. He was tired of entertaining this silent young man, who stood, cup in hand, on the rug, frowning at the portraits of his forefathers, and he sent Barbara to the piano with the certainty that Harding would follow her. As soon as he saw them safely at the other end of the room he dropped with a sigh of relief into the chair which she had quitted, and took up his book.

The girl, meanwhile, turned over her music and questioned Reynold. He did not sing?—did not play? No; and he understood very little, but he liked to

listen. He turned the pages for her, once or twice too fast, generally much too slowly, never at the right moment. Then Barbara began to play something which she knew by heart, and he stood a little aside, with his moody face softening, and his downward-glancing eyes following her fingers over the keys, as if she were weaving the strands of some delicate tissue. When she stopped, rested one hand on the music-stool on which she sat, and turned from the piano to hear what her uncle wished for next, he saw, as she leaned backward, the pure curve of her averted cheek, and the black lace and amber beads about her softly-rounded throat.

"Oh, I know that by heart, too!" she exclaimed.

He took up a sheet of music from the piano, and gazed vaguely at it while she struck the first notes. He read the title without heeding it, and then saw pencilled

above it in a bold, but somewhat studied, hand,

"ADRIAN SCARLETT."

For a moment the name held his glance; and when he laid the paper down he looked furtively over his shoulder. He knew that it was an absurd fancy, but he felt as if some one had come into the room and was standing behind Barbara.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD LOVE STORY.

THE next morning saw the three at breakfast in a little room adjoining the drawing-room. The sky was overcast, and before the meal was over Barbara turned her head quickly as the rain lashed the window in sudden fury. She arched her brows, and looked at Mr. Harding with anxious commiseration.

"It's going to be a wet day," she said.

He raised his eyes to the blurred prospect.

"It looks like it, certainly."

Her expression was comically aghast.

"I never thought of its being wet!"

"Yet such a thing does happen occasionally."

"Yes, but it needn't have happened today. I thought you would want to go out. What *will* you do?"

"Stay indoors, if you have no objection."

"But there is nothing to amuse you. You will be so dull."

"Less so than usual, I imagine," said Reynold. "Do you find it so difficult to amuse yourself on a wet day?"

"No, but I have a great deal to do. Besides, it is different. Don't men always want to be amused more than women?"

"Poor men!" said he.

Mr. Hayes read his letters and seemed to take no heed of his niece's trouble. But it appeared, when breakfast was finished, that he had arranged how the morning should be spent. He announced his intention of taking young Harding over the

Place, and he carried it out with a thoroughness which would have done honour to a professional guide, showing all the pictures, mentioning the size of the rooms, and relating the few family traditions—none of which, by the way, reflected any especial credit on the Rothwells. He stopped with bright-eyed appreciation before a cracked and discoloured map, where the Mitchelhurst estate was shown in its widest extent. Reynold looked silently at it, and then stalked after his host through all the chilly faded splendour of the house, shivering sometimes, sneering sometimes, but taking it all in with eager eyes, and glancing over the little man's white head at the sombre shelves of the library or the portraits on the walls. Mr. Hayes was fluent, precise, and cold. Only once did he hesitate. They had come to a small sitting-room on the ground floor, which, in spite of long disuse, still somehow

conveyed the impression that it had belonged to a young man.

"This was John Rothwell's favourite room," he said. He looked round. "I remember, yes, I remember, as if it were yesterday, how he used——"

Harding waited, but he stood staring at the rusty grate, and left the sentence unfinished.

"And to think that now he should be living from hand to mouth on the Continent!" he said at last, and compressed his lips significantly.

He took the young man to the servants' hall, across which the giggling voices of two or three maids echoed shrilly, till they were suddenly silenced by the master's approach. Reynold followed him down long stone passages, and thought, as he went, how icy and desolate they must be on a black winter night. He was oppressed by the size and dreariness of the place,

and bewildered by the multiplicity of turnings.

"I think," said Mr. Hayes suddenly, "that I have shown you all there is to see indoors."

And, as Reynold replied that he was much obliged, he pushed a door, and motioned to his guest to precede him. Reynold stepped forward, and discovered that he was in the entrance hall, facing Barbara, who had just come down the broad white stairs, and still had her hand upon the balustrade. It seemed to him as if he had come through the windings of that stony labyrinth, the hollow rooms and pale corridors, to find a richly-coloured blossom at the heart of all.

"Oh, Barbara, I'll leave Mr. Harding to you now," said the old gentleman. "I'm going to my study—I must write some letters."

He crossed the black and white pavement

with brisk, short steps, and vanished through a doorway.

"Has uncle shown you everything?" she asked.

"I should think so."

"It's a fine place, isn't it?"

"Very fine, and very big," said Harding slowly. "Very empty, and ghostly, and dead."

"Oh, you don't like it! I thought it would be different to you. I thought it would seem like home, since it belonged to your own people."

"Home, sweet home!" he answered with a queer smile. "Well, it is a fine place, as you say. And what have you been doing all the morning?"

"Housekeeping," said Barbara. "And now"—she set down a small basket of keys on the hall table, as if she were preparing for action—"now I am going to set the clock right."

"I'll stay for that if you'll allow me," said Reynold. "I remember what you told me last night. It is *the* time, and the world stands still when it stops."

"For me, not for you," the girl replied. "You have your watch—you don't believe in the big clock."

"Yes, I do. Here, in Mitchelhurst, what does one want with any but Mitchelhurst time? What have I to do with Greenwich? But as for Mitchelhurst, your uncle has talked to me till I feel as if I were all the Rothwells who ever lived here. Why, what's this? Sunshine!"

"Yes," said Barbara. "It's going to clear up."

It could hardly be called actual sunlight, but there certainly was a touch of pale autumn gold growing brighter about them as they stood.

Harding was listening to the monotonous tick—tick—tick—tick.

"I remember a man in some book," he said, "who didn't like to hear a clock going—always counting out time in small change."

"Oh, but that's a worrying idea! I should hate to think of my life doled out to me like that!"

"I'm afraid you must," he answered, with his little rough-edged laugh. "It would be very delightful to take one's life in a lump, but how are you going to have more than a moment in a moment? There are plenty of us always trying to do it. If you could find out the way——"

"How, trying?" said Barbara.

"Trying to keep the past and grasp the future," Harding replied. "Working and waiting for some moment which is to hold at least half a lifetime—when it comes! Oh, I quite agree with you; I should like a feast, and I am fed by spoonfuls!"

She looked up at him a little doubtfully,

and the clock went on ticking. "I always thought it was like a heart beating," she said, swerving from the idea he had presented as if it were distasteful. "Now!"

There was silence in the empty hall, as if, in very truth, she had laid her brown young hand upon Time's flying pulse, and stilled it.

"Talk of killing time!" said Harding.

"No," Barbara answered, without turning her head. "Time's asleep—that's all—asleep and dreaming. He'll soon wake up again."

She had so played with the idle fancy that, quite unconsciously, she spoke in a hushed voice, which deepened the impression of stillness. Harding said no more, he simply watched her. His imagination had been quickened by the sight of the Place; its traditional memories, its pride, and its decay had touched him more deeply than he knew. Life, with its

hardness and its haste, its obscure and ugly miseries and needs, had relaxed its grasp, and left him to himself for a little space in the midst of that curious loneliness. He felt as if the wide, living, wind-swept world beyond its walls were something altogether alien and apart. Everything about him was pale and dim; the very sunlight was faded, as if it were the faint reflection of a glory that was gone; everything rested as if in the peace of something that was neither life nor death. Everything was faded and dim, except the girl who stood, softly breathing, a couple of steps away, and even she seemed to be held by the enchantment of the place, and to wait in passive acquiescence. Reynold's grey eyes dilated and deepened.

But as she stood there, unconscious of his gaze, Barbara smiled. It was just the slightest possible smile, as if she answered some smiling memory; a curve of the lip,

hardly more than hinted, which might betoken nothing deeper than the recollection of some melodious scrap of rhyme or music. Yet Reynold drew back as if it stung him. "That's not for me!" he said to himself.

The movement startled Barbara from her reverie. "Oh, how like you are to that picture in the drawing-room!" she exclaimed, impulsively.

He knew what she meant, and the innocent utterance was a second sting. But he laughed. "What, the good-looking one?"

It seemed to her that she could have found a light answer but for his eyes upon her. As it was, he had the gratification of seeing her colour and hesitate. "I—I wasn't thinking—I didn't mean—" she stammered, shyly. "Oh, of course!" And then, angry with herself for her unreadiness, she stepped forward, and, with a

gesture of impatience, set the pendulum swinging.

"Time is to go on again?" said he.

"Yes," Barbara replied, decidedly. "It would be tiresome if it stood still long. It had better go on. Besides, I'm cold," and she turned away with a pretty little shiver. "I want to go to the fire; I can't stay to attend to it any longer."

Harding lingered, and after an instant of irresolution she left him to a world which had resumed its ordinary course.

At luncheon there was the inevitable mention of the weather, and Mr. Hayes, with his eyes fixed upon his plate, said, "Yes, it has cleared up nicely. I suppose you are going into the village?"

The young people hesitated, not knowing to whom the question was addressed. Miss Strange waited for Mr. Harding, and Mr. Harding for Miss Strange. Then they said "Yes" at the same moment,

and felt themselves pledged to go together.

"I thought so," said Mr. Hayes, and began to remind his niece of this thing and that which she was to be sure and show their visitor. "And the sooner you go the better," he added when the meal was over. "The days grow short."

Barbara looked questioningly at Mr. Harding. "If you like to go——"

"I shall be delighted, if you will allow me," said the young man, and a few minutes later they went together down the avenue.

"The days grow short," Mr. Hayes had said, and everything about them seemed set to that sad autumnal burden. The boughs above their heads, the ground under foot, were heavy with moisture, the bracken was withered and brown, there were no more butterflies, but at every breath the yellowing leaves took their uncertain flight to the wet

earth. The young people, each with a neatly furled umbrella, walked with something of ceremonious self-consciousness, making little remarks about the scenery, and Mr. Hayes, from his window, followed them with his eyes.

"Rothwell, every inch of him," he said to himself, as Reynold turned and looked backward at the Place. "I never knew one of the lot yet who didn't think that particular family had a right to despise all the rest of the world. The only difference I can see is that this fellow despises the family too. Well, *let* him! Why not? But, good Lord! what an end of all his mother's hopes!" And Mr. Hayes went back to his fireside—*his*, while John Rothwell was dodging his creditors on the Continent! There was unutterable dreariness in the thought of such a destiny, but the little old man regretted it with a complacent rubbing of his hands and a remembrance of Roth-

well's arrogance. There is a belief, engendered by the moral stories of our childhood, that it is good for a man that his unreasonable pride should be broken—a belief which takes no heed of the chance that its downfall may hurl the whole fabric of life and conduct into the foulness of the gutter. Mr. Hayes naturally took the moral story view of a pride by which he had once been personally wounded; yet he wore a deprecating air, as if Fate, in too amply avenging him, had paid a compliment to his importance which was almost overpowering.

It was more than a quarter of a century since Rothwell and he had been antagonists, though they had not avowed the fact in so many words, and Rothwell, with no honour or profit to himself, had baffled him. Herbert Hayes was then over forty and unmarried. The Mitchelhurst gossips had made up their minds that he would live

and die a bachelor. But one November Sunday he came, dapper, bright-eyed, and self-satisfied, to Mitchelhurst church, gazed with the utmost propriety into his glossy hat, stood up when the parson's dreary voice broke the silence with "When the wicked man——" and, looking across at the Rothwells' great pew, met his fate in a moment.

The pew held its usual occupants—the old squire, grey, angular, and scornful; young Rothwell, darker, taller, paler, less politely contemptuous, and more lowering; Kate, erect and proud, sulkily conscious of a beauty which the rustic congregation could not understand. These three Hayes had often seen. But there was a fourth, a frail, colourless girl, burdened rather than clothed with sombre draperies of crape, pale to the very lips, and swaying languidly as she stood, who unconsciously caught his glance and held it. She suffered her head,

with the little black bonnet set on the abundance of her pale hair, to droop over her Prayer-book, and she slid downward when the exhortation was ended as if she could stand no longer. The time seemed interminable to him until she rose again.

His instantaneous certainty that there was no drop of Rothwell blood in her veins was confirmed by later inquiry. He learnt that she was distantly related to the squire's wife, and had recently lost her parents. Though she had not been left absolutely penniless, her little pittance was not enough to keep her in idleness, and she was staying at Mitchelhurst while the question of her future was debated. It was difficult to see what Minnie Newton was to do in a hard-working world. She could sink into helplessly graceful attitudes, she could watch you with a softly troubled gaze, anxious to learn what she ought to think or say; she was delicate, gentle, and very slightly

educated. She had not a thought of her own, and she was pure with the kind of purity which cannot grasp the idea of evil, and fails to recognise it, unless indeed vice is going in rags and dirt to the police-station, and using shocking language by the way. Her simplicity was touching. She thought nothing of herself; she would cling to the first hand that happened to be held out to her. She might be saved by good luck, but nature had obviously designed her for a victim.

Miss Newton was polite to Mr. Hayes as to everybody else, but she was the last person at Mitchelhurst Place to suspect the little gentleman's passion. The very servants found it out, and wondered at her innocence. John Rothwell laughed.

"What a fool she is!" he said to his sister, as he stood by the window one day, and saw Hayes coming up the avenue.

"That's an undoubted fact," said the magnificent Kate.

"And what a fool he is!" John continued.

"Well, we won't quarrel about that either," she replied liberally. "They will be all the better matched."

"Matched?" said Rothwell. "No."

She looked up hastily.

"Eh?" she said. "Not matched? And why not?"

Instead of answering, he deliberately lighted a cigarette and smoked, gazing darkly at her.

Kate shrugged her shoulders.

"What difference can it possibly make to you?"

He took his cigarette from his lips and looked at it.

"It will make a difference to him," he said at last.

The bell rang, and the knocker added its emphatic summons. One of Rothwell's

dogs began to bark. Kate had risen, and stood with her eyes fixed on her brother's face.

"It would be a very good thing for the girl," she remarked meditatively. "I don't see what is to become of her, poor thing, unless she marries."

"Damn him!" said Rothwell.

The answer was not so irrelevant as it appeared. His gaze was as steady as Kate's own, and seemed to prolong his words as a singer prolongs a note. She drew her brows together, as if perplexed.

"Well," she said, turning away, "I must go and look after our lovers!"

"And I," he said.

The dapper, contented little man had done Rothwell no harm, but the young fellow cherished a black hatred, born of the dulness of his vacant life. Hayes, without being rich, was very comfortably off, and he was apt to betray the fact with innocent

ostentation. A sovereign was less to him than a shilling to John Rothwell, and it seemed to the latter that he could always hear the gold chinking when Hayes talked. One could do so much with a sovereign, and so little with a shilling. Rothwell was hungry, with a hunger which only just fell short of being a literal fact, and he had to stand by, with his hands in his empty pockets, while Hayes could have good dinners, good wine, good clothes, good horses, whatever he liked in the way of pleasure—and was "such a contemptible little cad with it all," the young man snarled. His own poverty would have been more bearable had it not been for his neighbour's ease and security. And now, heaven be praised!—heaven?—the prosperous man had set his heart on this whitefaced, fair-haired, foolish girl who was under the roof of Mitchelhurst Place, and for once he should be baffled.

Rothwell set to work with evil ingenuity —it seemed almost fiendish, but, really, he had nothing else to do—to ruin Hayes's chance of success. But for him it must have been almost a certainty. Kate was inclined to favour the suitor. The old squire disliked him, perhaps with a little of his son's feeling, but would have been very well satisfied to see the girl provided for. And Minnie Newton was there for any man, who had a will of his own, and was not absolutely repulsive, to take if he pleased. The course of true love seemed about to run with perfect smoothness till young Rothwell stepped in and troubled it.

Mockery, not slander, was his weapon. As Miss Newton idled over her embroidery he would lounge near her and make little jests about Hayes's age, size, and manners. She listened with a troubled face. Of course Mr. Rothwell was talking very cleverly, and she tried not to remember that she

had found Mr. Hayes very kind and pleasant when he called the day before. Of course it was absurd that a man of that age should want to be taken for five-and-twenty—yes, and he had a *very* ridiculous way of putting his head on one side like a bird—when Mr. Rothwell had insisted on having her opinion, she had said, "Yes, it was *very* ridiculous" —and a gentleman, a real gentleman, would not talk so much about his money, and what he could do with it—Mr. Rothwell said so, and he certainly knew. And as she had agreed to it she supposed it was quite right that he should repeat this at dinner-time, as if it were her own remark, though she wished he wouldn't, because his father turned sharply and looked at her. But, no doubt, Mr. Hayes did look absurdly small by the side of John Rothwell, and there was something common in his manners. Many people might think they were all very well, but a lady would feel that there

was something wanting. And so on, and so on, till she began to ask herself what John Rothwell would say of her if, after all this, she showed more than the coldest civility to Mr. Hayes.

Kate perfectly understood the position of affairs, but did not choose openly to oppose her brother. If Hayes would have come and carried Minnie off, young Lochinvar fashion, she would have been secretly pleased. As it was, she was contemptuously kind to the girl, and if the little suitor met the two young women in the village, Miss Rothwell shook hands and looked away. Once she found herself some business to do at the Mitchelhurst shop, and sent Minnie home, lest she should be out too long in the December cold. She had spied Herbert Hayes coming along the street, and had rightly guessed that he would see and pursue the slim, black-clothed figure. And, indeed, he used his walk with Miss Newton

to such good purpose that he might have won her promise then and there if a tall young man had not suddenly sprung over a stile and confronted them. Minnie fairly cowered in embarrassment as she met Rothwell's meaning glance, which assumed that she would be delighted to be rid of a bore, and she suffered him to give her his arm and to take her home, leaving poor Hayes to feel very small indeed as he stood in the middle of the road. He tried a letter, but it only called forth a little feebly-penned word of refusal as faint as an echo.

Hayes never suspected the young man's deliberate malice. He fancied the old squire, if anybody, was his enemy; but he was more inclined to set the difficulty down to the Rothwells' notorious pride than to any special ill-will to himself.

"No one is good enough for them, curse them!" he said over the little note. "They

won't give me a chance of winning her. I'm not beaten yet though!"

But he was. Early in January Minnie Newton took cold, drooped in the chilly dreariness of the old house, and died before the spring came in.

One day Kate Rothwell came upon Hayes as he lingered, a melancholy little figure, by the girl's grave.

"Ah, Miss Rothwell," he said, looking up at her, "I wanted to have had the right to care for her and mourn her, but it was not to be!"

"No," said Kate. "I'm sorry," she added, after a moment. It was just at the time when she herself was about to defy all the barren traditions of the Rothwells to marry Sidney Harding with his brilliant prospects of wealth. Harding's half-brother, who had made the great business, was pleased with the match, and promised Sidney a partnership in a

couple of years. Everything was bright for Kate, and she could afford a regretful thought to poor Hayes. "I'm sorry," she said.

Her voice was hard, but the slightest proffer of sympathy was enough. "Ah! I knew you wished me well—God bless you!" said the little man, "and help you as you would have helped me!"

Perhaps Kate Rothwell felt that at that rate Providence would not take any very active interest in her affairs. She turned aside impatiently. "Pray keep your thanks for some one who deserves them, Mr. Hayes. I don't."

"You could not do anything, but I know you were good to *her*. She told me, that afternoon——" He spoke in just the proper tone of emotion.

"Nonsense!" Kate answered, sharply. "How could she? there was nothing to tell." Mr. Hayes might well say, even a

quarter of a century later, that Miss Rothwell had an unpleasant manner.

Nevertheless she held a place in that idealised picture of his love which in his old age served him for a memory. In Sidney Harding's death, within a year of the marriage, he saw a kindred stroke to that which had robbed him of his own hope, and he never thought of Kate without a touch of sentimental loyalty. When he met Kate's son that October afternoon, with the familiar face and voice, on his way to Mitchelhurst, he had felt that, Rothwell though he was, he must be welcomed for his mother's sake. And yet it had almost seemed as if it were John Rothwell himself come back to sneer in a new fashion.

How came he to be so evidently poor while old Harding was rolling in wealth? Mr. Hayes, sitting over the fire, wondered at this failure of Kate's hopes. People had called it a fair exchange, her old name

for the Hardings' abundance of newly-coined gold. But where was the gold? Plainly not in this young Harding's pockets. What did he do for a living? Why was he not in his uncle's office, a man of business with the world before him? There was no stamp of success about this listless, long-legged fellow, who had come, as hopeless as any Rothwell, to linger about that scene of slow decay. "He'll do no good," said Mr. Hayes to himself, stirring up a cheerful blaze.

CHAPTER VI.

REYNOLD'S RESOLUTION.

MEANWHILE the young people had passed through the great gate and turned to the right. "Do you mind which way you go?" Barbara asked, and Reynold replied that he left it entirely to her. "Then," she said, "we will go this way, and come back by the village; you will get a better view so."

At first, however, it seemed that a view was the one thing which was certainly not to be had in the road they had chosen. On their left was a tangled hedge, on their right a dank and dripping plantation of firs. The slim, straight stems, seen one beyond another, conveyed to Reynold the

impression of a melancholy crowd, pressing silently to the boundary of the road on which he walked. It was one of those fantastic pictures which reveal themselves in unfamiliar landscapes, and Barbara, who had seen the wood under a score of varying aspects, took no especial heed of this one, as she picked her way daintily by the young man's side. Indeed she did not even note the moment when the trees were succeeded by a turnip-field, lying wide and wet under the pale sky. But when in its turn the field gave place to an open gateway and a drive full of deep ruts, in which the water stood, she paused. "You see that house?" she said.

It was evident from its surroundings of soaked yard, miscellaneous buildings, dirty tumbrils, and clustered stacks, that it was a farm-house. Harding looked at it and turned inquiringly to her. "It was much larger once," said Barbara. "Part of it

was pulled down a long while ago. Your people lived here before they built Mitchelhurst Place."

He pushed out his lower lip. "Well," he said, "I think they showed their good taste in getting out of this."

"But it was better then," said the girl. "And even now, sometimes in the spring when I come here for cowslips——"

She stopped short, for he was smiling. "Oh, no doubt! Everything looks better then. But I have come too late." He had to step aside as he spoke to let a manure cart go by, labouring along the miry way. "And what do you call this house?" he asked.

"Mitchelhurst Hall. I don't think there is anything much to see, but if you would like to look over it or to walk round it——"

"No, thank you; I am content." He took off his hat in mocking homage to the home of the Rothwells, and turned to

go. "And have you any more decayed residences to show me, Miss Strange?"

"Only some graves," she answered, simply.

"Oh, they are all graves!" said Harding with his short laugh, swinging his umbrella as they resumed their walk. Already Barbara had become accustomed to that little jarring laugh, which had no merriment in it. She did not like it, but she was curiously impressed by it. When the young man was grave and stiff and shy she was sorry for him; she remembered that he was only Mr. Reynold Harding, their guest for a week. But when he was sufficiently at his ease to laugh she felt as if all the Rothwells were mocking, and she were the interloper and inferior.

"I suppose it does seem like that to you —as if they were all graves," she said timidly, as she led the way across the road to a gate in the tangled hedge; the field into which it led sloped steeply down.

"That is what people call the best view of Mitchelhurst," she explained.

To the left was Mitchelhurst Place, gaunt and white among its warped and weather-beaten trees. Before them lay the dotted line of Mitchelhurst Street, and they looked down into the square cabbage-plots. The sails of the wind-mill swung heavily round, and the smoke went up from the black-smith's forge. To the right was the church, with its thickset tower, and the sun shining feebly on the wet surface of its leaden roof. Barbara pointed out a small oblong patch of grass and evergreens as the vicarage garden, while a bare building, of the rawest red brick, was the Mitchelhurst workhouse. The view was remarkably comprehensive. Mitchelhurst lay spread below them in small and melancholy completeness.

"Yes, it's all there, right enough," said Reynold, leaning on the gate. "An excellent view. All there, from the Place where

my people spent their money, to the workhouse, where—— By Jove!" his voice dropped suddenly, "I'm not Rothwell enough to have a right to be taken into the Mitchelhurst workhouse! They'd send me on somewhere, I suppose. I wonder which they would call my parish!"

"Are you sorry?" Barbara asked, after a pause.

"Sorry not to be in the workhouse?" indicating it with a slight movement of his finger. "No, not particularly."

"I didn't mean that," said the girl, a little shortly. "I meant, of course, are you sorry you are not a Rothwell?"

"I don't know."

He spoke slowly, half reluctantly, and still leaned on the gate, with his eyes wandering from point to point of the little landscape, which was softened and saddened by the pale light and paler haze of October. It was Barbara who finally broke the silence.

"You didn't like the house this morning, and you didn't like the old hall just now, so I thought most likely you wouldn't care for this."

"Well, it isn't beautiful," he replied, without turning his head. "Do you care much about it, Miss Strange? Why should anybody care about it? There are wonderful places in the world—beautiful places full of sunshine. Why should we trouble ourselves about this little grey and green island where we happened to be born? And what are these few acres in it more than any other bit of ploughed land and meadow?"

"I thought you didn't care for it," said Barbara, sagely. "I thought you scorned it."

"Scorn it—I can't scorn it! It isn't mine!" He turned away from it, as if in a sudden movement of impatience, and lounged with his back to the gate. "It's

like my luck!" he said, kicking a stone in the road.

Barbara was interested. Harding's tone revealed the strength and bitterness of his feelings. He had never seemed to her so much of a Rothwell as he did at that moment. "What is like your luck?" she ventured to ask.

He jerked his head in the direction of Mitchelhurst. "I may as well be honest," he said. "Honest with myself—if I can! Look there—I have mocked at that place all my life; for very shame's sake I have kept away from it because I had vowed I didn't care whether one stone of it was left upon another. What was it to me? I am not a Rothwell. I'm Reynold Harding, son of Sidney Harding, son of Reynold Harding—there my pedigree grows vague. My grandfather is an importan man—we can't get beyond him. He died while my father was in petticoats. He

was a pork-butcher in a small way. I believe he could write his name—*my* name—and that he always declared that his father was a Reynold too. But we don't know anything about my great-grandfather—perhaps he was a pork-butcher in a smaller way. My uncle Robert went to London as a boy and made all the money, pensioned his father, and afterwards educated his half-brother Sidney, who was twenty years younger than himself. He would have made my father his partner if he had lived. If my father had lived I might have been rich. As it is, I'm not rich, and I'm not a Rothwell."

"Well, you look like one!" said Barbara. She was not very wise. It seemed to her a cruel thing that this earlier Reynold should have been a pork-butcher—a misfortune on which she would not comment. She looked up at the younger Reynold with the sincerest sympathy shining in

her eyes, and in an unreasoning fashion of her own took part with him and with the old family, as if his grandfather were an unwarranted intruder who had thrust himself into their superior society. "You look like one!" she exclaimed, and Reynold smiled.

"And after all," she said, pursuing her train of thought, "you are half Rothwell, you know. As much Rothwell as Harding, are you not?"

He was still smiling. "True. But that is a kind of thing which doesn't do by halves."

She assented with a sigh. She had never before talked to a man whose grandfather was a pork-butcher, and she did not know what consolation to offer. She could only look shyly and wistfully at Mr. Harding, as he leaned against the gate with his back to the prospect, while she resolved that she would never tell her uncle. She

did not think her companion less interesting after the revelation. This discord, this irony of fate, this mixing of the blood of the Rothwells and the small tradesman, seemed to her to explain much of young Harding's sullen discontent. He was the last descendant of the old family of which she had dreamed so often, and he was the victim of an unmerited wrong. She wanted him to say more. "And you wouldn't come to Mitchelhurst before?" she said, suggestively.

"No; but the thought of the place was pulling at me all the time. I couldn't get rid of it. And so—here I am! And I have seen the dream of my life face to face—it's behind my back just at this minute, but I can see it as well as if I were looking at it. I'm very grateful to you for showing me this view, Miss Strange, but you'll excuse me if I don't turn round while I speak of it?"

"Oh, yes," said Barbara, wonderingly.

He had his elbows on the top rail of the gate, and looked downward at the muddy way, rough with the hoof marks of cattle. "You see," he explained, "I want to say the kind of thing one says behind a—a landscape's back."

"I'm sorry to hear it," she answered. She had drawn a little to one side, and had laid a small gloved hand on one of the gate posts. Somebody, many years before, had deeply cut a clumsy M on the cracked and roughened surface of the wood. The letter was as grey and as weather-worn as the rest. Barbara touched it delicately with a finger-tip, and followed its ungainly outline. Probably it was his own initial that the rustic had hacked, standing where he stood, but she recognised the possibility that the rough carving might be the utterance of the great secret of joy and pain, and the touch was almost a caress.

"Some people follow their dreams through life, and never get more than a glimpse of them, even as dreams," said Harding, slowly. "Well, I have seen mine. I have had a good look at it. I know what it is like. It is dreary—it is narrow—cold—hideous."

"Oh!" cried Barbara, as if his words hurt her. Then, recovering herself, "I'm sorry you dislike it so much. Well, you must give it up, mustn't you?"

He laughed. "Life without a fancy, without a desire?" he said.

"Find something else to wish for."

"What? If there were anything else, should I care twopence for Mitchelhurst? No, it is my dream still—a dream I'm never likely to realise, but the only possible dream for me. Only now I know how poor and dull my highest success would be."

"You had better have stayed away," said the girl.

He took his elbows off the gate, and bowed in acknowledgment of the polite speech. "Oh, you know what I mean," she said hurriedly.

"Yes, I know. And, except for the kindness of your fairy godmother, I believe you are perfectly right. *That*, of course, is a different question."

Barbara would not answer what she fancied might be a sneer. "You see the place at its worst," she said, "and there is nobody to care for it; everything is neglected and going to ruin. Don't you think it would be different if it belonged to some one who loved it? Why don't you make your fortune," she exclaimed, with sanguine, bright-eyed directness, as if the fortune were an easy certainty, "and come back and set everything right? Don't you think you could care for Mitchelhurst if——"

She would have finished her sentence

readily enough, but Reynold caught it up.

"*If!*" he said, with a sudden startled significance in his tone. Then, with an air of prompt deference, "Shall I go and make the fortune at once, Miss Strange? Shall I? Yes, I think I could care for Mitchelhurst, as you say, *if*—" He smiled. "One might do much with a fortune, no doubt."

"Make it then," said Barbara, conscious of a faint and undefined embarrassment.

"Must it be a very big one?"

"Oh, I think it may as well be a tolerable size, while you are about it. Hadn't we better be moving on?"

Mr. Harding assented. "Where are we going now?"

"To the church. That is, if you care to go there."

"Oh, I like to go very much. I wonder what you would call a tolerable fortune," he said in a meditative tone.

"My opinion doesn't matter."

"But you are going to wish me success while I am away making it?"

"Oh, certainly."

"That will be a help," he said gravely. "I shan't look for an omen in the sky just now—do you see how threatening it is out yonder?"

The clouds rolled heavily upwards, and massed themselves above their heads as they hastened down a steep lane which brought them out by the church. Barbara stopped at the clerk's cottage for a ponderous key, and then led the way through a little creaking gate. The path along which they went was like a narrow ditch, the mould, heaped high on either side, seemed as if it were burdened with his imprisoned secrets. The undulating graves, overgrown with coarse grasses, rose up, wave-like, against the buttressed walls of the churchyard, high above the level of the outer road.

The church itself looked as if it had been dug out of the sepulchral earth, so closely was it surrounded by these shapeless mounds. Barbara, to whom the scene was nothing new, and who was eager to escape the impending shower, flitted, alive, warm, and young, through all this cold decay, and never heeded it. Harding followed her, looking right and left. They passed under two dusky yew trees, and then she thrust her big key into the lock of the south door.

"Are my people buried in the churchyard?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed reverentially. "Your people are all inside."

He stepped in, but when he was about to close the door he stood for a moment, gazing out through the low-browed arch. It framed a picture of old-fashioned headstones fallen all aslant, nettles flourishing upon forgotten graves, the trunks of the

great yews, the weed-grown crest of the churchyard wall, defined with singular clearness upon a wide band of yellow sky. The gathered tempest hung above, and its deepening menace intensified the pale tranquillity of the horizon. "I say," said Harding as he turned away, "it's going to pour, you know!"

"Well, we are under shelter," Barbara answered cheerfully, as she laid her key on the edge of one of the pews. "If it clears up again so that we get back in good time it won't matter a bit. And anyhow we've got umbrellas. The font is very old, they say."

Harding obediently inspected the font.

"And there are two curious inscriptions on tablets on the north wall. Mr. Pryor —he's the vicar—is always trying to read them. Do you know much about such things?"

"Nothing at all."

"Oh!" in a tone of disappointment. "I'm afraid you wouldn't get on with Mr. Pryor then."

"I'm afraid not."

"Perhaps you wouldn't care to look at them."

"Oh, let us look, by all means."

They walked together up the aisle. "*I* don't care about them," said Barbara, "but I suppose Mr. Pryor would die happy if he could make them out."

"Then I suspect he is happy meanwhile, though perhaps he doesn't know it," Reynold replied, looking upward at the half effaced lettering.

"He can read some of it," said the girl, "but nobody can make out the interesting part."

Harding laughed, under his breath. Their remarks had been softly uttered ever since the closing of the door had shut them in to the imprisoned silence. He moved

noiselessly a few steps further, and looked round.

Mitchelhurst Church, like Mitchelhurst Place, betrayed a long neglect. The pavement was sunken and uneven, cobwebs hung from the sombre arches, the walls, which had once been white, were stained and streaked, by damp and time, to a blending of melancholy hues. The half light, which struggled through small panes of greenish glass, fell on things blighted, tarnished, faded, dim. The pews with their rush-matted seats were worm-eaten, the crimson velvet of the pulpit was a dingy rag. There was but one bit of vivid modern colouring in the whole building—a slim lancet window at the west end, a discord sharply struck in the shadowy harmony. "To the memory of the vicar before last," said Barbara, when the young man's glance fell on it. Such gleams of sunlight as lingered yet in the stormy sky without

irradiated Michael, the church's patron saint, in the act of triumphing over a small dragon. The contest revealed itself as a mere struggle for existence; a Quaker, within such narrow limits, must have fought for the upper hand as surely as an archangel. Harding as he looked at it could not repress a sigh. He fully appreciated the calmness of the saint, and the neatness with which the little dragon was coiled, but it seemed to him a pity that the vicar before last had happened to die; and he was glad to turn his back on the battle, and follow Miss Strange to the north chancel aisle. "These are all the Rothwell monuments," she said. "Their vault is just below. This is their pew, where we sit on Sunday."

Having said this she moved from his side, and left him gazing at the simple tablets which recorded the later generations of the old house, and the elaborate

memorials of more prosperous days. More than one recumbent figure slept there, each with upturned face supported on a carven pillow; the bust of a Rothwell was set up in a dusty niche, with lean features peering out of a forest of curling marble hair; carefully graduated families of Rothwells, boys and girls, knelt behind their kneeling parents; the little window, half blocked by the florid grandeur of a grimy monument, had the Rothwell arms emblazoned on it in a dim richness of colour. In this one spot the dreariness of the rest of the building became a stately melancholy. Harding looked down. His foot was resting on the inscribed stone which marked the entrance to that silent, airless place of skeletons and shadows, compared to which even this dim corner, with its mute assemblage, was yet the upper world of light and life. If he worked, if fortune favoured him, if he succeeded beyond all reasonable hope, if he

were indeed predestined to triumph, that little stone might one day be lifted for him.

The windows darkened momentarily with the coming of the tempest. Through the dim diamond panes the masses of the yew-trees were seen, and their movement was like the stirring of vast black wings. The effigies of the dead men frowned in the deepening gloom, and their young descendant folded his arms, and leaned against the high pew, with a slant gleam of light on his pale Rothwell face. Barbara went restlessly and yet cautiously up and down the central aisle, and paused by the reading-desk to turn the leaves of the great old-fashioned prayer-book which lay there. When its cover was lifted it exhaled a faint odour, as of the dead Sundays of a century and more. While she lingered, lightly conscious of the lapse of vague years, reading petitions for the welfare of "Thy servant *GEORGE*, our most gracious

King and Governour," "her Royal Highness the Princess Dowager of *Wales*, and all the Royal Family," the page grew indistinct in the threatening twilight, as if it would withdraw itself from her idle curiosity. She looked up with a shiver, as overhead and around burst the multitudinous noises of the storm, the rain gushing on the leaden roof, the water streaming drearily from the gutters to beat on the earth below, and, in a few moments, the quick, monotonous fall of drops through a leak close by. This lasted for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. Then the sky grew lighter, the downpour slackened, a sense of over-shadowing oppression seemed to pass away, and St. Michael and his dragon brightened cheerfully. Barbara went to the door and threw it open, and a breath of fresh air came in with a chilly smell of rain.

As she stood in the low archway she heard Harding's step on the pavement

behind her. It was more alert and decided than usual, and when she turned he met her glance with a smile.

"Well?" she said. "I didn't like to disturb you, you looked so serious."

"I was thinking," he admitted. "And it was a rather serious occasion. My people are not very cheerful company."

"And now you have thought?"

"Yes," he said, still smiling. "Yes, I have thought—seriously, with my serious friends yonder."

Barbara, as she stood, with her fingers closed on the heavy handle of the door, and her face turned towards Harding, fixed her eyes intently on his.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "You have made up your mind to come back to Mitchelhurst."

"Who knows?" said he. "I'm not sanguine, but we'll see what time and fortune have to say to it. At any rate

my people are patient enough — they'll wait for me!"

To the girl, longing for a romance, the idea of the young man's resolution was delightful. She looked at him with a little quivering thrill of impatience, as if she would have had him do something towards the great end that very moment. Her small, uplifted face was flushed, and her eyes were like stars. The brightening light outside shone on the soft brown velvet of her dress, and something in her eager, lightly-poised attitude gave Reynold the impression of a dainty brown-plumaged, bright-eyed bird, ready for instant flight. He almost stretched an instinctive hand to grasp and detain her, lest she should loose her hold of the iron ring and be gone.

"I know you will succeed—you will come back!" she exclaimed. "How long first, I wonder?"

"*Shall* I succeed?" said Reynold, half

to himself, but half-questioning her to win the sweet, unconscious assurance, which meant so little, yet mocked so deep a meaning.

"Yes!" she replied. "You will! You must be master here."

Master! She might have put it in a dozen different ways, and found no word to waken the swift, meaning flash in his eyes which that word did. Her pulses did not quicken, she perfectly understood that he was thinking of Mitchelhurst. She could not understand what mere dead earth and stone Mitchelhurst was to the man at her side.

"You will have to restore the church one of these days," she said.

Harding nodded.

"Certainly. But it will be very ugly, anyhow."

"Well, at least you must have the roof mended. And now, please, will you get

the key? It is on the ledge of that pew just across the aisle. I think we had better be going—it has almost left off raining."

She stepped outside and put up her umbrella, while he locked up his ancestors, smiling grimly. It seemed rather unnecessary to turn the key on the family party in that dusty little corner. They were quiet folks, and, as he had said, they would wait for him and his fortune not impatiently. If he could have shut in the brightness of youth, the warmth and life and sweetness which alone could make the fortune worth having, if he could have come back in the hour of success to unfasten the door and find all there—then indeed his big key would have been a priceless talisman. Unfortunately one can shut nothing safely away that is not dead. The old Rothwells were secure enough, but the rest was at the mercy of time and change, and all the winds that blow.

The pair were silent as they turned into Mitchelhurst Street. Reynold looked at the small, shabby houses, and noted the swinging sign of the "Rothwell Arms," though his deeper thoughts were full of other things. But about half way through the village he awoke to a sudden consciousness of eyes. Eyes peered through small-paned windows, stared boldly from open doorways, met him inquisitively in the faces of loiterers on the path, or were lifted from the dull task of mending the road as he walked by with Barbara. He looked over his shoulder and found that other people were looking over their shoulders, after which he felt himself completely encompassed.

"People here seem interested," he remarked to Miss Strange, while a pale-faced, slatternly girl, with swiftly-plaiting fingers, leaned forward to get a better view.

"Why, of course they are interested.

You are a stranger, you know. It is quite an excitement for them."

"You call that an excitement?" said he.

"Yes. If you spent your life straw-plaiting in one of these cottages you would be excited if a stranger went by. It would be kinder of you if you did not walk so fast."

"No, no," said Harding, quickening his steps. "I don't profess philanthropy."

"Besides, you are not altogether a stranger," she went on. "I dare say they think you are one of the old family come to buy up the property."

"Why should they think anything of the kind?" he demanded incredulously.

"Well, they know you are staying at the Place. Every child in the street knows that. And, you see, Mr. Harding, nobody comes to Mitchelhurst without some special reason, so perhaps they have a right to be curious. I remember how they stared a few months

ago—it was at a gentleman who was just walking down the road——"

"Indeed," said Harding. "And what was *his* special reason for coming? I suppose," he added quickly, "I've as good a right to be curious as other Mitchelhurst people."

"Oh, I don't know. He was a friend of Uncle Herbert's—he came to see him."

"And did *he* walk slowly from motives of pure kindness?" the young man persisted.

"Yes," said Barbara defiantly. "He stood stock still and looked at the straw plaiting. I don't know about the kindness; perhaps he liked it."

"Well, I don't like it."

"But you needn't take such very long steps: these three cottages are the last. Do you know I'm very nearly running?"

Of course he slackened his pace and begged her pardon; but in so doing he relapsed into the uneasy self-consciousness of

their first interview. When they reached the gate of the avenue he held it open for her to pass, murmuring something about walking a bit further. Barbara looked at him in surprise, and then, with a little smiling nod, went away under the trees, wondering what was amiss. "I can't have offended him—how could I?" she said to herself, and she made up her mind that her new friend was certainly queer. It was the Rothwell temper, no doubt, and yet his awkward muttering had been more like the manner of a sullen schoolboy. A Rothwell should have been loftily superior, even if he were disagreeable. It was true, as Barbara reflected, almost in spite of herself, that Mr. Harding had no such hereditary obligation on the pork-butcher side of his pedigree.

Reynold had spoken out of the bitterness of his heart, and a bitter frankness is the frankest of all. But perhaps he had not shown his wisdom when he so quickly

confided his grandfather to Miss Strange. Because we may have tact enough to choose the mood in which our friend shall listen to our secret, we are a little too apt to forget that the secret, once uttered, remains with him in all his moods. In this case the girl had been a sympathetic listener, but young Harding scarcely intended that the elder Reynold should be so vividly realised.

Later, when all outside the windows was growing blank and black, Barbara went up to dress for dinner. She was nearly ready when there came a knock at her door, and she hurried, candle in hand, to open it. In the gloom of the passage stood the red-armed village girl who waited on her.

"Please, miss, the gentleman told me to give you this," said the messenger, awkwardly offering something which was only a formless mass in the darkness.

"What?" said Miss Strange, and turned

the light upon it. The wavering little illumination fell on a confusion of autumn leaves, rich with their dying colours, and shining with rain. Among them, indistinctly, were berries of various kinds, hips and haws, and poison clusters of a deeper red, vanishing for a moment as the draught blew the candle flame aside, and then reappearing. One might have fancied them blood drops newly shed on the wet foliage.

"Oh!" Barbara exclaimed in surprise, and after a moment's pause, "give them to me." She gathered them up, despite some thorny stems, with her disengaged hand, and went back into her room. So that was the meaning of Mr. Harding's solitary walk! She stood by the table, delicately picking out the most vivid clusters, and trying their effect against the soft cloud of her hair, cloudier than ever in the dusk of her mirror. "I hope he hasn't been

slipping into any more ditches!" she said to herself.

With that she sighed, for the thought recalled to her the melancholy of an autumnal landscape. She remembered an earlier gift, roses and myrtle, a summer gift, the giver of which had gone when the summer waned. She had seen him last on a hot September day. "We never said good-bye," Barbara thought, and let her hand hang with the berries in it. "He said he should not go till the beginning of October. When he came that afternoon and I was out, and he only saw uncle, I was sure he would come again. Well, I suppose he didn't care to. He could if he liked—a girl can't; there are lots of things a girl can't do; but a man can call if he pleases. Well, he must have gone away before now. And he didn't even write a line, he only sent a message by uncle, his kind regards—Who wants his kind regards?

—and he was sorry not to see me. Very well, my kind regards, and I'm sure I don't want to see him!"

She ended her meditations with an emphatic little nod, but the girl in the mirror who returned it had such a defiantly pouting face that she quite took Barbara by surprise.

"I'm not angry," Miss Strange declared to herself after a pause. "Not the least in the world. The idea is perfectly absurd. It was just a bit of the summer, and now the summer is gone." And so saying she put Mr. Harding's autumn berries in her hair, and fastened them at her throat, and, with her candle flickering dimly through the long dark passages, swept down to the yellow drawing-room to thank him for his gift

CHAPTER VII.

A GAME AT CHESS.

When Kate Rothwell promised to be Sidney Harding's wife she was very honestly in love with the handsome young fellow. But this happy frame of mind had been preceded by a period of revolt and disgust when she did not know him, and had resolved vaguely on a marriage — any marriage—which should fulfil certain conditions. And that she should be in love with the man she married was not one of them. In fact, the conditions were almost all negative ones. She had decreed that her husband should not be a conspicuous fool, should not be vicious, should not be

repulsively vulgar, and should not be an unendurable bore. On the other hand he should be fairly well off. She did not demand a large fortune, she was inclined to rate the gift and prospect of making money as something more than the possession of a certain sum which its owner could do nothing but guard. Given a fairly cultivated man, and she felt that she would absolutely prefer that he should be engaged in some business which might grow and expand, stimulating the hopes and energies of all connected with it. The sterility and narrowness of life at Mitchelhurst had sickened her very soul. She was conscious of a fund of rebellious strength, and she demanded liberty to develop herself, liberty to live. She knew very well how women fared among the Rothwells. She had seen two of her father's sisters, faded spinsters, worshipping the family pride which had blighted them. Nobody wanted them, their

one duty was to cost as little as possible. That they would not disgrace the Rothwell name was taken for granted. Kate used to look at their pinched and dreary faces, and recognise some remnants of beauty akin to her own. She listened to their talk, which was full of details of the pettiest economy, and remembered that these women had been intent on shillings and half-pence all their lives, that neither of them had ever had a five-pound note which she could spend as it pleased her. And their penurious saving had been for—what? Had it been for husband or child it would have been different, the half-pence would have been glorified. But they paid this life-long penalty for the privilege of being the Misses Rothwell of Mitchelhurst. Life with them was simply a careful picking of their way along a downward slope to the family vault, and it was almost a comfort to think that the poor ladies were safely housed there,

with their dignity intact, while Kate was yet in her teens.

Later came the little episode of Minnie Newton and her admirer. Kate perceived her brother's indifference to the girl's welfare, and the brutality of his revenge on the man whose crime was his habit of chinking the gold in his waistcoat pocket. Probably, with her finer instincts, she perceived all this more clearly than did John Rothwell himself. She did not actively intervene, because, in her contemptuous strength, she felt very little pity for a couple whose fate was ostensibly in their own hands. Minnie was not even in love with Hayes, and Kate did not care to oppose her brother in order to force a pliant fool to accept a fortunate chance. She let events take their course, but she drew from them the lesson that her future depended on herself. And, miserably as life at Mitchelhurst was maintained, she was, perhaps, the first of the family to see

that the time drew near when it would not be possible to maintain it at all, partly from the natural tendency of all embarrassments to increase, and partly from John Rothwell's character. He could not be extravagant, but he had a dull impatience of his father's minute supervision. Kate made up her mind that the crash would come in her brother's reign.

She had already looked round the neighbourhood of her home and found no deliverer there. Had there been any one otherwise suitable the Rothwell pride was so notorious that he would never have dreamed of approaching her. An invitation from a girl who had been a school friend offered a possible chance, and Kate coaxed the necessary funds from the old squire, defied her brother's grudging glances, and went, with a secret, passionate resolve to escape from Mitchelhurst for ever. She saw no other way. She was not conscious

of any special talent, and she said frankly to herself that she was not sufficiently well educated to be a governess. Moreover, the independence which achieves a scanty living was not her ideal. She was cramped, she was half-starved, she wanted to stretch herself in the warmth of the world, and take its good things while she was young.

Fate might have decreed that she should meet Mr. Robert Harding, a successful man of business in the city, twenty years older than herself, slightly bald, rather stout, keen in his narrow range, but with very little perception of anything which lay right or left of the road by which he was travelling to fortune. The beautiful Miss Rothwell would have thanked Fate and set to work to win him. But it is not only our good resolutions that are the sport of warring chances. Our unworthy schemes do not always ripen into fact. Kate did not meet Mr. Robert Harding, she met his brother

Sidney, a tall, bright-eyed, red-lipped young fellow, with the world before him, and the pair fell in love as simply and freshly as if the croquet ground at Balaclava Lodge were the Garden of Eden, or a glade in Arcady. In a week they were engaged to be married, and were both honestly ready to swear that no other marriage had ever been possible for either. To her he appeared with the golden light of the future about his head; to him she came with all the charm and shadowy romance of long descent, and of a poverty far statelier than newly-won wealth. Friends reminded Sidney that with his liberal allowance from his brother, and his prospect of a partnership at twenty-five, he might have married a girl with money had he chosen. Friends also mentioned to Kate, with bated breath, that the Hardings' father, dead twenty years earlier, had been a pork-butcher. Sidney laughed, and Kate turned away in scorn. She was absolutely

glad that she could make what the world considered a sacrifice for her darling.

At Mitchelhurst her engagement, though not welcomed, was not strongly opposed. John Rothwell sneered as much as he dared, but he knew his sister's temper, and it was too like his own for him to care to trifle with it. So he stood aside, very wisely, for there was a touch of the lioness about Kate with this new love of hers, and he saw mischief in the eyes that were so sweet while she was thinking about Sidney. It was at that time that she spoke her word of half-scornful sympathy to Herbert Hayes.

And in a year her married life, with all its tender and softening influences, was over. An accident had killed Sidney Harding before he was twenty-five, before his child was born, and Kate was left alone in comparatively straitened circumstances. For her child's sake she endured her sorrow, demanding almost fiercely of God that He

would give her a son to grow up like his dead father, and when the boy was born she called him Reynold. Sidney was too sacred a name; there could be but one Sidney Harding for her, but she remembered that he had once said that he wished he had been called Reynold, after his father.

It was pathetic to see her dark eyes fixed upon the baby features, trying to trace something of Sidney in them, trying hard not to realise that it was her own likeness that was stamped upon her child. "He is darker, of course," she used to say, "but—" He could not be utterly unlike his father, this child of her heart's desire! It was not possible—it must not be—it would be too monstrous a cruelty. But month by month, and year by year, the little one grew into her remembrance of her brother's solitary boyhood, and faced her with a moody temper that mocked her own. No one knew how long she waited for a tone

or a glance which should remind her of her dead love, remind her of anything but the old days that she hated. None ever came. The boy grew tall and slim, handsome after the Rothwell type, with a curious instinctive avidity for any details connected with Mitchelhurst and his mother's people. He would not confess his interest, but she divined it and disliked it. And Reynold, on his side, unconsciously resented her eternal unspoken demand for something which he could not give. He would scowl at her over his shoulder, irritated by his certainty that her unsatisfied eyes were upon him. Mother and son were so fatally alike that they chafed each other continually. Every outbreak of temper was a pitched battle, the combatants knew the ground on which they fought, and every barbed speech was scientifically planted where it would rankle most.

A crisis came when it was decided that

Reynold should leave school and go into his uncle's office. The boy did not oppose it by so much as a word; but as he stood, erect and silent, while Mr. Harding enlarged on his prospects, he looked aside for a moment, and Kate's keener eyes caught his contemptuous glance. To her it was an oblique ray, revealing his soul. He despised the Hardings; he was ashamed of his father's name. She did not speak, but in that moment with a pang of furious anguish she chose once and for ever between her husband and her son, and sealed up all her tenderness in Sidney's grave.

Reynold's stay in Robert Harding's office was short, but it was not unsatisfactory while it lasted. He never professed to like his work, but he went resignedly through the daily routine. He was not bright or interested, but he was intelligent. What was explained to him he understood, what was told him he remembered, as a mere

matter of course. He acquiesced in his life in a city counting-house, as his grandfather at Mitchelhurst had acquiesced in his narrow existence there. It seemed as if the men of the family were apathetic and weary by nature, and only Kate had had energy enough to revolt.

An unexpected chance, the freak of a rich old man who had business relations with Robert Harding, and who remembered Sidney, made Reynold the possessor of a small legacy a few months after he had entered his uncle's service. He at once announced his intention of going to Oxford. Of course, as he said, without his mother's consent he could not go till he was of age, and if she chose to refuse it he must wait. Kate hesitated, but Mr. Harding, who was full of schemes for the advancement of his own son, did not care for an unwilling recruit, and the young fellow was coldly permitted to have his way.

His mother, in spite of her disapproval, watched his course with an interest which she would never acknowledge. Was he really going to achieve success in his own fashion, perhaps to make the name she loved illustrious?

Nothing was ever more commonplace and unnoticeable than Reynold's university career. He spent his legacy, and came back as little changed as possible. It seemed as if he had felt that he owed himself the education of a gentleman, and had paid the debt, as a mere matter of course, as soon as he had the means. "What do you propose to do now?" Kate inquired. He answered listlessly that he had secured a situation as under-master in a school. And for three or four years he had maintained himself thus, making use of his mother's house in holiday time, or in any interval between two engagements, but never taking anything in the shape of

actual coin from her. She suspected that he hated his drudgery, but he never spoke of it.

Thus matters might have remained if it had not been for Robert Harding's son. The old man, whose dream had been to found a great house of business which should bear his name when he was gone, was unlucky enough to have an idle fool for his heir. Reynold's record was not brilliant, but it showed blamelessly by the side of his cousin's folly and extravagance. Mr. Harding hinted more than once that his nephew might come back if he would, but his hints did not seem to be understood. Little by little it became a fixed idea with him that Reynold alone could save the name of Harding, and keep his cousin from utter ruin. He recognised a kind of scornful probity in his nephew, which would secure Gerald's safety in his hands, and perhaps he exaggerated the

promise of Reynold's boyhood. At last he stooped to actual solicitation. Kate gave the letter to her son, silently, but with a breathless question in her eyes.

The old man offered terms which were almost absurdly liberal, but he tried to mask his humiliation by clothing the proposal in dictatorial speech. He gave Reynold a clear week in which to consider his reply, and almost commanded him to take that week. But Mr. Harding wrote, if in ten days he had not signified his acceptance, the situation would be filled up. He should give it, with the promise of the partnership, to a distant connection of his wife's. "Understand," said the final sentence, "that I speak of this matter for the first and last time."

"I think," said Reynold, looking round for writing materials, "that I had better answer this at once."

"Not to say 'No!'" cried Kate. "You

shall not!" She stood before him, darkly imperious, with outstretched hand. It seemed to her as if the whole house of Harding appealed to her son for help. He was asked to do the work that Sidney would have done if he had lived. "You shall not insult him by refusing his offer without a moment's thought—I forbid it!" she exclaimed.

"Very well," said Reynold. "I will wait." He turned aside to the fire-place, and stood gazing at the dull red coals.

His mother followed him with her glance, and after a moment's silence she made an effort to speak more gently. "He is your father's brother," she said.

"Yes," Reynold replied, in an absent tone. "Such an offer couldn't come from the other side."

The words were a simple statement of fact, the utterance was absolutely expressionless, but a sudden flame leapt into

Kate's eyes. "Answer when and as you please!" she cried. Her son said nothing.

He was waiting at the time to hear about a tutorship which had been mentioned to him. The matter was not likely to be settled immediately, and the next morning he appeared with his bag in his hand, and announced that he was going into the country for a few days, and would send his address. In due time the letter came with "Mitchelhurst" stamped boldly on it, like a defiance.

When Barbara Strange bade young Harding go and make his fortune, she did not know the curious potency of her advice. The words fell, like a gleam of summer sunshine, across a world of stony antagonisms and smouldering fires. And, with all the bright unconsciousness of sunshine, they transformed it into a place of life and hope. She had called her little cross her talisman, but Harding's talisman—for there are such

things—was the folded letter in his pocket-book. As she stood beside him, flushed, eager, radiant, pleading with him, "Could not you care for Mitchelhurst, *if*—" she awakened a sudden craving for action, a sudden desire of possession in his ice-bound heart. To any other woman he could have been only Reynold Harding, a penniless tutor, recognised, perhaps, as a kind of degenerate offshoot of the Rothwell tree. But to Barbara he was the one remaining hope of the old family of which she had thought so much; he was the king who was to enjoy his own again, and her shining glances bade him go and conquer his kingdom without delay. And in Mitchelhurst Church, as he stood among his dead people, with the rain beating heavily on—

"The lichen-crusted leads above,"

he had made up his mind. He would cast in his lot with the Hardings till he should have earned the right to come back to the

Rothwells' inheritance. He would do it, but not for the Rothwells' sake — for a sweeter sake—breathing and moving beside him in that place of tombs. He looked up at the marble countenance of his wigged ancestor, considering it thoughtfully, yet not asking himself if that dignified personage would have approved of his resolution. Reynold, as he stared at the aquiline features, wondered idly whether the lean-faced gentleman had ever known and loved a Barbara Strange, and whether he had kissed her with those thin, curved lips of his. Of course they were not as grimy and pale in real life as in their sculptured likeness. And yet it was difficult to picture him alive, with blood in his veins, stooping to anything as warm and sweet as Barbara's damask-rose mouth. It seemed to Reynold that only he and Barbara, in all the world, were truly alive, and he only since he had known her.

When he went back into the lanes alone, after leaving her at the gate, the full meaning of the decision which had swiftly and strangely reversed the whole drift of his life rushed upon him and bewildered him. He hastened away like one in a dream. It was as if he had broken through an encircling wall into light and air. Ever since his boyhood he had held his fancy tightly curbed, he had reminded himself by night and day that he had nothing, was nothing, would be nothing; in his fierce rejection of empty dreams he had chosen always to turn his eyes from the wonderful labyrinthine world about him, and to fix them on the dull grey thread of his hopeless life. Now for the first time in his remembrance he relaxed his grasp, and his fancy, freed from all control, flashed forward to visions of love and wealth. He let it go—why should he hinder it, since he had resolved to follow where it led? In this

sudden exaltation his resolution seemed half realised in its very conception, and as he gathered the berries from the darkening hedgerows he felt as if they were his own, the first-fruits of his inheritance. He hurried from briar to briar under the pale evening sky, tearing the rain-washed sprays from their stems, hardly recognising himself in the man who was so defiantly exultant in his self-abandonment. Nothing seemed out of reach, nothing seemed impossible. When the darkness overtook him he went back with a triumphant rhythm in his swinging stride, feeling as if he could have gathered the very stars out of the sky for Barbara.

This towering mood did not last. It was in the nature of things that such loftiness should be insecure, and indeed Reynold could hardly have made a successful man of business had it been permanent. It would not do to add up Barbara and the

stars in every column of figures. But the very fact of passing from the open heavens to the shelter of a roof had a sobering effect, the process of dressing for dinner recalled all the commonplace necessities of life, and in his haste he had a difficulty with his white necktie, which was distinctly a disenchantment. The shyness and reserve which were the growth of years could not be shaken off in a moment of passion. They closed round him more oppressively than ever when he found himself in the yellow drawing-room, face to face with Mr. Hayes, and, being questioned about his walk, he answered stiffly and coldly, and then was silent. Yet enough of the exaltation remained to kindle his eyes, though his lips were speechless, when he caught sight of Barbara standing by the fire-side, with a cluster of blood-red berries in her hair, and another nestling in the dusky folds of lace close to her white throat. The vivid points

of colour held his fascinated gaze, and seemed to him like glowing kisses.

He had a game of chess with his host after dinner. As a rule he was a slow and meditative player, scanning the pieces doubtfully, and suspecting a snare in every promising chance. But that evening he played as if by instinct, without hesitation. Everything was clear to him, and he pressed his adversary closely. Mr. Hayes frowned over his calculations, apprehending defeat, though the game as yet had taken no decisive turn. Presently Barbara came softly sweeping towards them in her black draperies, set down her uncle's coffee-cup at his elbow, and paused by Harding's side to watch the contest. Her presence sent a thrill through him which disturbed his clear perception of the game. It made a bright confusion in his mind, such as a ripple makes in lucid waters. He put out his hand mechanically towards the

pawn which he had previously determined to move.

"Dear me!" said Barbara, strong in the traditional superiority of the looker-on, "why don't you move your bishop?"

Reynold moved his bishop.

Quick as lightning Mr. Hayes made his answering move, and, when it was an accomplished fact, he said—

"Thank you, Barbara."

Reynold and Barbara looked at each other. The aspect of affairs was entirely changed. A white knight occupied a previously guarded square, and simply offered a ruinous choice of calamities.

"Oh, what have I done?" the girl exclaimed.

Reynold laughed his little rough-edged laugh.

"Nothing," he said. "Don't blame yourself, Miss Strange. You only asked me why I didn't move my bishop. I ought to have

explained why I *didn't*. Instead of which —I *did*. It certainly wasn't your fault."

Barbara lingered and bit her under-lip as she gazed at the board.

"I've spoilt your game," she said remorsefully. "I think I'd better go now I've done the mischief."

"No, don't go!" Harding exclaimed, and Mr. Hayes, rubbing his hands, chimed in with a mocking—

"No, don't go, Barbara!"

The girl looked down with an angry spark in her eyes.

"Well, I'll give you some coffee," she said to the young man; "you haven't had any yet."

"And then come back, Barbara!" her uncle persisted.

She did come back, flushed and defiant, determined to fight the battle to the last. But for her obstinacy Mr. Hayes would have had an easy triumph, for young Hard-

ing's defence collapsed utterly. Apparently he could not play a losing game, and a single knock-down blow discouraged him once for all. Barbara, taking her place by his side, showed twice his spirit, and at one time seemed almost as if she were about to retrieve his fallen fortunes. Mr. Hayes ceased to taunt her, and sat with a puckered forehead considering his moves. He kept his advantage, however, in spite of all she could do, and presently unclosed his lips to say "Check!" at intervals. But it was not till he had uttered the fatal "Mate!" that his face relaxed. Then he got up, and made his niece a little bow.

"Thank you, Barbara!" he said, and walked away to the fire-place.

The young people remained where he had left them. Barbara trifled with the chessmen, moving them capriciously here and there. Reynold, with his head on his hand, did not lift his eyes above the level

of the board, but watched her slim fingers as they slipped from piece to piece, or lingered on the red-stained ivory. She brought back all their slain combatants, and set them up upon the battle-field.

"I wish I hadn't meddled!" she said suddenly. "I spoilt your game."

She spoke in a low voice, and Reynold answered in the same tone,

"What *did* it matter?"

"No, but I hate to be beaten. I wanted you to win."

"Well," said he, still with his head down, "you set me to play a bigger game to-day."

"Ah!" said Barbara, decidedly. "I won't meddle with that!"

"No?" he said, looking up with a half-hinted smile. Her cheeks were still burning with the excitement of her long struggle, and her bright eyes met his questioning glance.

"Perhaps you think I can't help meddling?" she suggested.

"Perhaps you can't. You are superstitious, aren't you? You believe in amulets and that kind of thing—or half believe. Perhaps you are foredoomed to meddle, and destiny won't let you set me down to the game and go quietly away."

Barbara was holding the king between her fingers. She replaced it on its square so absently, while she looked at Reynold, that it fell. His words seemed to trouble her.

"Well, if this game is an omen, you had better not *let* me meddle," she said at last.

"How am I to help it?"

"Thank you!" she exclaimed resentfully; "I'm not so eager to interfere in your affairs as you seem to take for granted!"

"Indeed I thought nothing of the kind. I thought we were talking of destiny. And,

you see, you were good enough to take a little interest this afternoon."

She uttered a half-reluctant "Yes." She had a dim feeling that she was, in some inexplicable way, becoming involved in young Harding's fortunes.

The notion half-frightened, half-fascinated her. When they began their low-voiced talk she had unconsciously leaned a little towards him. Now she did not precisely withdraw, but she lifted her face, and there was a touch of shy defiance in the poise of her head.

Mr. Hayes, as he stood by the fire, was warming first one little polished shoe, and then the other, and contemplating the blazing logs.

"Barbara," he said suddenly, "did we have this wood from Jackson? It burns much better than the last."

Barbara was the little housekeeper again in a moment. She crossed the room, and

explained that it was not Jackson's wood, but some of a load which Mr. Green had asked them to take. "You said I could do as I pleased," she added, "and I thought they looked very nice logs when they came."

"Green—ah! Jacob Green knows what he's about. Made you pay, I dare say. No, no matter." The girl's eyes had gone to a little table, where an account-book peeped out from under a bit of coloured embroidery. "I'm not complaining; I don't care about a few extra shillings, if things are good. Get Green to send you some more when this is burnt out."

Reynold had risen when Barbara left him, and after lingering for a moment, a tall black and white figure, in the lamplight by the chessboard, he followed her, and took up his position on the rug. The interruption to their talk had been unwelcome, but it was not, in itself, unpleasant. He liked to

see Barbara playing the part of the lady of the Place. It was a sweet foreshadowing of the home, the dear home, that should one day be. There should be logs enough on the hearths of Mitchelhurst in October nights to come, and, though the fields and copses round might be wet and chill, the old house should be filled to overflowing with brightness and warmth and love. Some wayfarer, plodding along the dark road, would pause and look up the avenue, and see the lights shining in the windows beyond the leafless trees. Reynold pictured this, and pictured the man's feelings as he gazed. It was curious how, by a kind of instinct, he put himself in the outsider's place. He did not know that he always did so, but in truth he had never dreamed anything for himself till Barbara taught him, and his old way of looking at life was not to be unlearnt in a day. Still he was happy enough as he stood there, staring at

the fire, and thinking of those illuminated windows.

He could not sleep when he went to bed that night. The head which he laid on the chilly softness of his pillow was full of a joyous riot of waking visions, and he closed his eyes on the shadows only to see a girl's shining glances and rose-flushed cheeks.

CHAPTER VIII.

BARBARA'S TUNE.

HARDING fell asleep towards morning, and woke from his slumber with a vague sense that the world had somehow expanded into a wide and pleasant place, and that he had inherited a share of it. And though the facts were not quite so splendid when he emerged from his drowsy reverie, enough remained of possibilities, golden or rosy, to colour and brighten that Saturday. It is something to wake to a conviction that one's feet are set on the way to love and wealth.

While he dressed, he thought of the letter he had to write, and then of its

consequences. How long would it be before he would have the right to come and say to Barbara, "I have begun the fortune you ordered. I am not rich yet, but I have fairly started on the road to riches and Mitchelhurst—will you wait for me there?" Or might he not say, "Will you travel the rest of the way with me?" How long must it be before he could say that? Two years? Surely in two years he might unclose his lips; for he would work—it would be no wearisome task. A longing, new and strange, to labour for his love flooded the inmost recesses of his soul. The man's whole nature was suddenly broken up, and flowing forth as a stream in a springtide thaw. It seemed to him that he could give himself utterly to the most distasteful occupations; in fact, that he would reject and scorn any remnant of himself that had not toiled for Barbara.

The girl herself woke up, a room or two

away, and lay with her eyes fixed on the tester of the great shadowy bed. It was early, she need not get up for a few minutes more. The pale autumn morning stole in between the faded curtains, and lighted her vivid little face, a little face which might have been framed in a couple of encircling hands. And yet, small as it was, where it rested, with a cloud of dusky hair tossed round it over the pillow, it was the centre and the soul of that melancholy high-walled room. She had dreamed confusedly of Reynold Harding, and hardly knew where her dream ended and her waking thought began—perhaps because there was not much more reality in the one than in the other.

Girls have an ideal which they call First Love. It is rather a troublesome ideal, involving them in a thousand little perplexities, self-deceits, half-conscious falsehoods; but they adore it through them all. First Love is the treasure which must be

given to the man they promise to marry; the bloom would be off the fruit, the dew-drop dried from the flower, if they could not assure him that the love they feel for him was the earliest that ever stirred within their hearts. The utmost fire of passion must have the freshness of shy spring blossoms. Love, in his supreme triumphant flight from soul to soul, must swear he never tried his wings before.

But, to be honest, how often can a girl speak confidently of her first love? She reads poems and stories, and the young fellows who come about her, while she is yet in her teens, are hardly more than incarnate chapters of her novels. How did she begin? She loved Hector, it may be, and King Arthur, and Roland, and the Cid. Then perhaps she had a tender passion for Amyas Leigh, for the Heir of Redclyffe, or for Guy Livingstone; and the curate, or the squire's son, just home with his regiment

from India, carries on the romance. This she assures herself is the mystic first love; but the curate goes to another parish, or the lieutenant's leave comes to an end, and the living novel is forgotten with the others. She will order more books from Mudie's and take an interest in them, and in the hero of some private theatricals at a country house close by. She will meet the young man who lives on the other side of the county, but who dances so perfectly and talks so well, at the bachelors' ball. She will think a while first of one, then of the other; and afterwards, when the time comes to make that assurance of first love, she will, half unconsciously efface all these memories, and vow, with innocent, smiling lips, that her very dreams have held no shape till then.

Miss Strange was intent on the change in her little world of coloured shadows. Adrian Scarlett and Reynold Harding rose before

her eyes as pictures, more life-like than she could find in her books, but pictures nevertheless, figures seen only in one aspect. Adrian, a facile, warmly-tinted sketch of a summer poet; Reynold, a sombre study in black and grey—what *could* the little girl by any possibility know of these young men more than this? Reynold's romance, with its fuller development, its melancholy background, its hints of passion and effort, might well absorb the larger share of her thoughts. Her part was marked out in it; she was startled to see how a word of hers had awakened a dormant resolution. She was flattered, and, though she was frightened too, she felt that she could not draw back; she had inspired young Harding with ambition, and she must encourage him and believe in him in his coming fight with fortune. Barbara found herself the heroine of a drama, and for the sake of her new character she began to rearrange her

first impressions of the hero, to dwell on the pathos of his story, to deepen the ditch into which he had slipped in her service, till it would hardly have known itself from a precipice, to soften the chilly repulsion which she had felt at their meeting into the simple effect of his proud reserve. She lay gazing upward, with a smile on her lips, picturing his final home-coming, grouping all the incidents of that triumphant day about the tall, dark figure with the Rothwell features, who was just the puppet of her pretty fancies. The vision of his future, expanding like a soap-bubble, rose from the dull earth, and caught the gay colours of Barbara's sunny hopes. Everything would go well, everything must go well; he should make his fortune while he was yet young, and come back to the flowery arches and clashing bells of rejoicing Mitchelhurst. Beyond that day her fancy hardly went. Of course he would have to

take the name of Rothwell, the name which, for the perfection of her romance, should have been his by right. At that remembrance she paused dissatisfied—the pork-butcher was the one strong touch of reality in the whole story. In fact the mere thought of him brought her back to every-day life, and to the certainty that she must waste no more time in dreams.

Reynold, consulting his uncle's letter, found with some surprise that he had pushed silence to its utmost limit, and that another day's delay would have overstepped the boundary which Mr. Harding had so imperiously set. The discovery was a shock; it took away his breath for a moment, and then sent the blood coursing through his veins with a tingling exhilaration, the sense of a peril narrowly escaped. He was glad—glad in a defiant, unreasonable fashion—that he had not yielded till the last day, though at the same time he

was uneasy till his answer should be despatched. He went up to his room immediately after breakfast, and sat down to his task at the writing-table which faced the great window.

After one or two unsatisfactory beginnings he ended with the simplest possible note of acceptance, to which he added a postscript, informing his uncle that he should remain two or three days longer at Mitchelhurst Place, and hoped to receive his instructions there. He wrote a few lines to end the question of the tutorship for which he had been waiting, addressed the two envelopes, and leaned back in his chair to read his letters over before folding them.

As he did so he looked out over the far-spreading landscape. The sunshine broke through the veil of misty cloud and widened slowly over the land, catching here the sails of a windmill, idle in the autumn calm, there a church spire, or a bit of white road,

or a group of poplars, or the red wall of an old farmhouse. The silver grey gave place to vaporous gold, and a pale brightness illumined the paper in his hand on which those fateful lines were written. One would have said Mitchelhurst was smiling broadly at his resolution. Reynold stretched himself and returned the smile as if the landscape were an old friend who greeted him, and tilting his chair backward he thrust his letter into the directed cover.

"When I come back," he said to himself, "I will take this room for mine."

Writing his acceptance of his uncle's offer had not been pleasant, yet now that it was done he contemplated the superscription,

"*R. Harding, Esq.*,"

with grave satisfaction. Finally, he took up the pen once more, hesitated, balanced it between his fingers, and then let it fall. "Why should I write to her?" said he,

while a sullen shadow crossed his face. "She will hear it soon enough. Since she is to have her own way about my career for the rest of my life, she may well wait a day or two to know it. Besides, I can't explain in a letter why I have given in. No, I won't write to-day." He shut up his blotting-case with an impatient gesture, and there was nothing for Mrs. Sidney Harding by that afternoon's post.

He went down the great stone stairs with his letters, and laid them on the hall table, as Barbara had told him to do. Then, pausing for a moment to study the weather-glass, a note or two, uncertainly struck, attracted his attention. The door of the yellow drawing-room was partly open, and Mr. Hayes was presumably out, for Barbara was at the old piano. When Harding turned his head he could see her from where he stood. The light from the south window fell on the simple folds of her soft

woollen dress, and brightened them to a brownish gold. She sat with her head slightly bent, touching the keys questioningly and tentatively, till she found a little snatch of melody, which she played more than once as if she were eagerly listening to it. The piano was worn out, of that there could be no doubt, yet Reynold found enchantment in the shallow tinkling sounds. He could not have uttered his feelings in any words at his command, but that mattered the less since Mr. Adrian Scarlett had enjoyed *his* feelings in the summer time, and, touching them up a little, had arranged them in verse. It was surely honour enough for that poor little tune that its record was destined to appear one day in the young fellow's volume of poems.

AT HER PIANO.

It chanced I loitered through a room,
Dusk with a shaded, sultry gloom,

And full of memories of old times—
I lingered, shaping into rhymes
My visions of those earlier days
'Mid their neglected waifs and strays
A yellowing keyboard caught my gaze,
And straight I fancied, as I stood
Resting my hand on polished wood,
Letting my eyes, contented, trace
The daintiness of inlaid grace,
That Music's ghost, outworn and spent,
Dreamed, near her antique instrument.

But when I broke its silence, fain
To call an echo back again
Of some old-fashioned, tender strain,
Played once by player long since dead—
I found my dream of music fled!
The chords I wakened could but speak
In jangled utterance, thin and weak,
In shallow discords, as when age
Reaches its last decrepit stage,
In feeble notes that seemed to chide—
This was the end! I stepped aside,
In my impatient weariness,
Into the window's draped recess.
Without, was all the joy of June;
Within, a piano out of tune!

But while, half hidden, thus I stayed,
There came in one who lightly laid
White hands upon the yellow keys

To seek their lingering harmonies.
I think she sighed—I know she smiled—
And straightway Music was beguiled,
And all the faded bygone years,
With all their bygone hopes and fears,
Their long-forgotten smiles and tears,
Their empty dreams that meant so much,
Began to sing beneath her touch.

The notes that time had taught to fret,
Racked with a querulous regret,
Forsook their burden of complaint,
For melodies more sweetly faint
Than lovers ever dreamed in sleep—
Than rippling murmurs of the deep—
Than whispered hope of endless peace—
Ah, let her play or let her cease,
For still that sound is in the air,
And still I see her seated there!

Yet, even as her fingers ranged,
I knew those jangled notes unchanged,
My soul had heard, in ear's despite,
And Love had made the music right.

So had Master Adrian written, after a good deal of work with note-book and pencil, during a long summer afternoon, and then had carried his rhymes away to polish them at his leisure. Reynold

Harding merely stood listening in the hall, as motionless as if he were the ghost of some tall young Rothwell, called back and held entranced by the sound of the familiar instrument. Barbara knew no more of his silent presence than she did of Adrian's verses. When she paused he stepped lightly away without disturbing her. He was very ignorant of music; he had no idea what it was that she had played; to him it was just Barbara's tune, and he felt that, when he left Mitchelhurst, he should carry it in his heart, to sing softly to him on his way.

He passed into the garden and loitered there, recalling the notes after a tuneless fashion of his own. The neglected grounds, which had seemed so sodden and sad when first he looked out upon them, had a pale, shining beauty as he walked to and fro, keeping time to the memory of Barbara's music. The eye did not dwell on their

desolation, but passed through the leafless boughs to bright misty distances of earth and cloudland. Reynold halted at last by the old sun-dial. The softly diffused radiance marked no passing hour upon it, but rather seemed to tell of measureless rest and peace. There was a slight autumnal fragrance in the air, but the young man perceived a sweeter breath, and stooping to the black earth, he found two or three violets half hidden in their clustering leaves. He hardly knew why they gave him the pleasure they did; he was not accustomed to find such delicate pleasure in such things. Perhaps if he had analysed his feelings he might have seen that, for a man who had just pledged himself to a life of hurrying toil, there was a subtle charm in the very stillness and decay and indolent content of Mitchelhurst, breathing its odours of box and yew into the damp, windless air. It was a curious

little pause before the final plunge. Reynold felt it even if he did not altogether understand, as he stood by the sun-dial which recorded nothing, with the violets at his feet, and the rooks sailing overhead across the faintly-tinted sky. A clump of overgrown dock-leaves stirred suddenly, Barbara's cat pushed its way through them and came to rub itself against him. He bent down and caressed it. "I'll come again—I'll come home," he said softly, as he stroked its arching back.

CHAPTER IX.

OF MAGIC LANTERNS.

It was fortunate that young Harding demanded little in the way of gaiety from Mitchelhurst. Such as it could give, however, it gave that evening, when the vicar, and a country squire who had a small place five or six miles away, came to dinner. The clergyman was a pallid, undersized man, who blinked, and twitched his lips when he was not speaking, and had a nervous trick of assenting to every proposition with an emphatic "Yes, yes." After the utterance of this formula his conscience usually awoke, and compelled him to protest, for he considered most

things that were said or done in the world as at any rate slightly reprehensible. This might happen ten times in one conversation, but the assent did not fail to come as readily the tenth time as the first. It would only have been necessary to say, with a sufficient air of conviction, "You see, don't you, Mr. Pryor, that under these circumstances I was perfectly justified in cutting my grandmother's throat with a blunt knife?" to secure a fervent "Yes, yes!" in reply.

The squire was not half an inch taller, a little beardless man with withered red cheeks, and brown hair which was curiously like a wig. Barbara had doubted through two or three interviews whether it was a wig or not, and she had been pleased when he talked to her, because it gave her an excuse for looking fixedly in the direction of his head. At last he arrived one day with his hair very badly cut, and a bit

of plaster on his ear, where the village barber had snipped it, after which she took no further interest in him. Happily her previous attention had given him a very high opinion of her intelligence and good taste, and Mr. Masters remained her loyal admirer. "A very sensible girl, Miss Strange," he would say, and Mr. Pryor would reply "Yes, yes," and then add doubtfully that he feared she was rather flighty, and that her indifference to serious questions was much to be regretted. This meant that Barbara would not take a class in the Sunday-school, and cared nothing about old books and tombstones.

The dinner was not a conversational success. Mr. Masters, on being introduced to Reynold Harding, was amazed at the likeness to the old family, and repeatedly exclaimed, "God bless my soul! How very remarkable!" Harding looked self-conscious and uncomfortable, and the vicar

said "Yes, exactly so." The little squire's eyes kept wandering from the young man's face to the wall and back again, as if he were referring him to all the family portraits. By the time they had finished their fish the resemblance was singularly heightened. Reynold was scowling blackly, and answering in the fewest possible words, which seemed to grate against each other as he uttered them. Mr. Hayes, who did not care twopence for his young guest's feelings, looked on with indifferent eyes, and would not interfere, while Barbara made a gallant little attempt to divert attention from Reynold's ill-temper by talking with incoherent liveliness to the clergyman. As ill-luck would have it, Mr. Masters, who had more than once addressed his new acquaintance as "Mr. Rothwell," suddenly grasped the fact that he was not Rothwell at all, but Harding, and began to take an unnecessary interest in the Harding

pedigree. He was so eager in his investigation that he did not see the young man's silent fury, but went on recalling different Hardings he had known or heard of. "That might be about your grandfather's time," he reckoned.

"You never knew my Hardings!" said Reynold abruptly, in so unmistakable a tone that Mr. Masters stopped short, and looked wonderingly at him, while Barbara faltered in the middle of a sentence. At that moment the remembrance of his grandfather was an intolerable humiliation to the poor fellow, tenfold worse because Barbara would understand. The dark blood had risen to his face and swollen the veins on his forehead, and his glance met hers. She coloured, and he took it as a confession that he had divined her thoughts. In truth she was startled and frightened at her hero of romance under his new aspect.

"Pryor," said Mr. Hayes sharply, "you are all wrong about that inscription in the church. Masters and I have been talking it over—eh, Masters?—and we have made up our minds that your theory won't do."

"Yes," said the vicar, and Mr. Masters chimed in, following his host's lead almost mechanically. The worthy little squire concluded that he must have said something dreadful, and wondered, as he talked, what these Hardings could have done. "I suppose some of 'em were hanged," he said to himself, and stole a glance of commiseration at Reynold, who was gloomily intent upon his plate. "People ought to let one know beforehand when there's anything disagreeable like that—why, one might talk about ropes! I shall speak to Hayes, though perhaps he doesn't know. A deucedly unpleasant young fellow, but so was John Rothwell, and it must be

uncommonly uncomfortable to have anything of that kind in one's family. God bless my soul! he looked as if he were going to murder me!"

Barbara breathed again when the inscription was mentioned, recognising a safe and familiar topic, warranted to wear well. They had not ended the discussion when she left them to their wine. Mr. Masters was quicker than Reynold, and held the door open for her to pass, with a little old-fashioned bow, but he exclaimed over his shoulder as he closed it, "No, no, Pryor, you are begging the question of the date," and she went away with those encouraging words in her ears. Mr. Masters and Mr. Pryor might disagree as much as they pleased. They would never come to any harm.

Still, as she waited alone till the gentlemen should come, she could not help feeling depressed. The yellow drawing-room was

more brilliantly lighted than usual, and the portrait of Anthony Rothwell chanced to be especially illuminated. Barbara sat down on a low chair, and took a book, but she turned the leaves idly, and whenever she lifted her eyes she met the painted gaze of the face that was so like Reynold. By nature she was happy enough, but her lonely life in the desolate old place, the lack of sympathy, which threw her back entirely on her own thoughts, the desires and dreams which she did not herself understand, but which sprang up and budded in the twilight of her innocent soul, had all combined to make her unnaturally imaginative. A little careless irresponsibility, a little healthy fun and excitement, would have cured her directly. But, meanwhile, the silence and decay of the great hollow house impressed her as it would not have impressed a heavier nature. She was like a butterfly in that wilderness of stone, brightening the spot on

which she alighted, but failing to find the sunlight that she sought. Her moods would vary from one moment to the next, answering the subtle influences which a breath of wholesome air from the outer world would have blown away. As she sat there that evening she wished she could escape from Mitchelhurst and Mr. Harding. His angry glance had printed itself upon her memory, and it haunted her. She had been playing with his hopes, trying to awaken his ambition, thinking lightly of the Rothwell temper as a mere item in the romantic likeness, and suddenly she had caught sight of something menacing and cruel, beyond all strength of hers. She lifted her head, and Anthony Rothwell looked as if he were smiling in malicious enjoyment at her trouble. The very effort she made to keep her eyes from the picture drew them to it more certainly, till the firelit room seemed to contract about the

portrait and herself, leaving no chance of escape from the ghostly *tête-à-tête*.

The sound of steps broke the spell. She threw down her book as the door opened, and could scarcely help laughing at the queer little company, the three small elderly men, and the tall young fellow who towered over them. A covert glance told her that Reynold was as pale, or paler, than usual, and she noticed that he answered in a constrained but studiously polite manner when the good-natured little squire made some remark on the chilliness of the autumn evenings. After a moment he came across to her, and stood with his elbow on the chimney-piece, looking at the blazing logs, while Anthony Rothwell smiled over his shoulder.

Barbara wondered what she should say to the pair of them, and she tormented her little lace-edged handkerchief in her embarrassment. Finally she let it fall. Young

Harding stooped for it, and as he gave it back their eyes met, and he smiled.

"Are you going to play to us?" he asked.

"I wish Miss Strange would play for me at my entertainment at the schools next week," said Mr. Pryor plaintively. "Won't you be persuaded, Miss Strange?"

"I'll play for you now if you like," she answered, "but you know my uncle won't let me play at the penny readings. And really it is no loss, I am nothing of a musician."

The vicar sighed and looked across at Mr. Hayes. "I wish he would!" he said. "Couldn't you persuade him? I can't get the programme arranged properly."

"Why, haven't you got the usual people?"

"Yes, yes, I have got the usual people. But perhaps," said Mr. Pryor, not unreasonably, "it would be as well to have something a little different—a little new, you know. It is extremely kind of them, but

the audience, the back benches, don't you know?—Well, I suppose they like variety."

Barbara looked gravely sympathetic.

"And it's rather awkward," Mr. Pryor continued, "young Dickson at the mill has some engagement that evening, and won't be able to sing 'Simon the Cellarer,' unless I put it the first thing."

"Why, he sings nothing else!" Miss Strange exclaimed.

"Yes, he *does* know two other songs, I believe, but they are, in my opinion, too broadly comic for such an entertainment as this. He hummed a little bit of one in my study one evening, in a *very* subdued manner, of course, just to give me an idea. I saw at once that it would never do. I stopped him directly, but I found myself singing the very objectionable words about the parish for days. Not *aloud*, you know, not *aloud!*"

Mr. Pryor looked sternly over the top of

Miss Strange's head, and pressed his lips so tightly together that she was quite sure he was singing Mr. Harry Dickson's objectionable song to himself at that very moment.

"But why shouldn't he sing 'Simon the Cellarer' at the beginning just as well as at the end?" she questioned.

"Yes," said the vicar, "but there is my little reading, of course that must come in early—my position as the clergyman of the parish, you see. And I thought of something a little improving, a short reading out of a volume of selections I happen to have, 'Simon the Cyrenian'."

"Why, you read that before," Barbara began, and then stopped and coloured.

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Pryor, "I did, but I don't think they paid much attention, the back benches were rather noisy that evening, and it is a nice length, and seems very suitable. But the difficulty is how to

keep 'Simon the Cellarer' and 'Simon the Cyrenian' apart on the programme. I don't know how it is to be managed, I'm sure. I thought perhaps you would play us something appropriate between the song and the reading. I'm afraid some of the audience may smile."

Reynold took his arm from the chimney-piece. "Appropriate to both Simons?" he inquired.

"Yes, just so, to both Simons. At least, not exactly that, but something by way of a transition, I suppose."

"I wonder what that would be like," Barbara speculated. "I'm really very sorry I can't help you, Mr. Pryor."

"Oh never mind," said the clergyman. "I did tell Dickson he might change the name in his song, but he wouldn't, in fact he answered rather flippantly. Well, I suppose I must find another reading, but it's a pity, when I knew of this one. Such

a suitable length! Unless," he looked at Reynold, "unless your friend—"

Reynold's "No!" was charged with intense astonishment and horror. "I can't play a note," he added.

"But you could recite something," Mr. Pryor persisted. "Now that would really be very kind. Something like the 'Charge of the Light Brigade'—'Into the valley of death,' don't you know, 'Rode the six hundred'—that pleases an audience. We had a young man from Manchester once who did that very well, a *little* too much action, perhaps, but remarkably well. Or something American — American humour. If it isn't flippant I see no objection to it; one should not be too particular, I think. And it is very popular. Not flippant, and not too broad—but I needn't say that—I feel very safe with you. I'm sure you would not select anything broad."

Harding had recoiled a step or two, and

stood with a stony gaze of unspeakable scorn. "It's out of the question," he said, "I couldn't think of such a thing. It's utterly impossible. Besides, I shall be gone."

"Well, I'm very sorry," said the vicar, "I only thought perhaps you might." He turned to Barbara, "Your other friend was so very kind at our little harvest home. Mr.—I forget his name—but it was very good of him."

"Mr. Scarlett," said Barbara. She had her hand up, guarding her eyes from the flickering brightness of a log which had just burst into flame, and Reynold, looking down at her, questioned within himself whether there were not a faint reflection of the name upon her cheek. But it might be his jealous fancy.

"Yes, yes, Scarlett, so it was. A very amusing young man."

This soothed the sullen bystander a little, though he hardly knew why, unless it

might be that he fancied that Barbara would not like to hear Mr. Scarlett described as a very amusing young man. But when she answered "Very amusing," with a certain slight crispness of tone, it struck him that he would have preferred that she should be indifferent.

The vicar took his leave a little later, mentioning the duties of the next day as a reason for his early departure. "Must be prepared, you know," he said as he shook hands with the squire.

Mr. Hayes came back from the door, smiling his little contemptuous smile. "That means that he has to open a drawer, and take out an old sermon," he said, turning to Mr. Masters. "Well, as I was saying——"

"Does he always preach old sermons?" Reynold asked Barbara.

"I think so. They always look very yellow, and they always seem old."

"Always preaches old sermons, and has the same old penny readings—do you go?"

"Oh yes, we always go. Uncle thinks we ought to go, only he won't let me do anything."

"Do you *want* to do anything?"

"No," said the girl. It was a truthful answer, but her consciousness of the intense scorn in Harding's voice made it doubly prompt.

"But do you like going?"

She hesitated. "Oh yes, sometimes. I liked going to the harvest home entertainment."

"Oh!" A pause. "Did Mr. Scarlett sing 'Simon the Cellarer'?"

"No, he did not." After a moment she went on. "They are not always penny readings; a little while ago we had a magic lantern and some sacred music. They were views of the Holy Land, you know, that was why we had sacred music."

"Oh!" said Reynold again. "And did you enjoy the views of the Holy Land?"

"Well, not so very much," she owned. "They didn't get the light right at first, and they were not very distinct, so he told us all about Bethlehem, and then found out that they had put in the wrong slide, and it was the woman at the well, so they had to change her, and then he told us all about Bethlehem over again. Joppa was the best; a fly got in somewhere and ran about over the roofs of the houses—it looked as big as a cat. I shall always remember about Joppa now. Poor Mr. Pryor began quite gravely—" Barbara paused, turned her head to see that her uncle was sufficiently absorbed, and then softly mimicked the clergyman's manner. "'Joppa, or Jaffa, may be considered the port of Jerusalem. It is built on a conical eminence overhanging the sea'—and then he saw us all whispering and laughing and the fly running

about. He told us it wasn't reverent; he was dreadfully cross about it. He stopped while they took Joppa out, and, I suppose, they caught the fly. Anyhow it never got in any more. Oh yes, it was rather amusing altogether."

"Was it?"

She threw her head back and looked up at him. "You are laughing at me," she said in a low voice, "but it isn't always so very amusing at home."

His face softened instantly. "I oughtn't to have laughed," he said. "I ought to know—" He could picture Barbara shut up with her smiling, selfish, unsympathetic little uncle, in the black winter evenings that were coming, all the fancies and dreams of eighteen pent within those white-panelled walls, and exhaling sadly in little sighs of weariness over book or needlework.

But he saw another picture too, a dull London sitting-room whose dreariness

seemed intensely concentrated on the face of a disappointed woman. Life had held little more for him than for Barbara, but he had rejected even its dreams, and had spent his musing hours in distilling the bitterness of scorn from its sordid realities. He would not have been cheered by a magnified fly. "You are wiser than I am, Miss Strange," he said abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"You take what you can get."

She considered for a moment. "You mean that I go to Mr. Pryor's entertainments, and hear 'Simon the——'"

"Cyrenian! Yes, and see Joppa in a magic lantern. That is very wise when the real Joppa is out of reach."

"I don't know," said Barbara hesitatingly, "that I ever very particularly wanted to go to Joppa."

"Nor I," said Harding, "but being some way off it will serve for all the unattainable

places where we do want to be. 'Joppa may be considered the port of Jerusalem'—wasn't that what Mr. Pryor said?" He repeated it slowly as if the words pleased him. "And where do you really want to go?"

"To Paris," said Barbara, with a world of longing in the word. "To Paris, and then to Italy. And then—oh, anywhere! But to Paris first."

"Paris!" Harding seemed to be recording her choice. "Well, that sounds possible enough. Surely you may count on Paris one of these days, Miss Strange; and meanwhile you can have a look at it with the help of the magic lantern."

She laughed. "Not Mr. Pryor's."

"Oh no, not Mr. Pryor's. I shouldn't fancy there were any Parisian slides in his. But I suspect you have a magic lantern of your own which shows it to you whenever you please."

"Pretty often," she confessed.

The dialogue was interrupted by a tardy request for some music from Mr. Masters. Barbara went obediently to the piano, and Reynold followed her. She would rather he had stayed by the fireside; his conscientious attempts to turn the leaf at the right time confused her dreadfully, and she dared not say to him, as she might have done to another man, "I like to turn the pages for myself, please." Suppose he should be hurt or vexed? She was learning to look upon him as a kind of thundercloud, out of which, without a moment's warning, came flashes of passion, of feeling, of resolution, of fury, of scorn. She did not know what drew them down. So she accepted his attentions, and smiled her gratitude. If only ("Yes, please!" in answer to an inquiring glance)—if only he would always be too soon, or always a little too late! Instead of which he arrived at

a tolerable average by virtue of the variety of his failures. Worst of all was a terrible moment of uncertainty, when, having turned too soon, he thought of turning back. "No, no!" cried Barbara.

"I'm very stupid," said Harding, "I'm afraid I put you out." "No, no," again from Barbara, while her busy fingers worked unceasingly. "Couldn't you give me just a little nod when it's time?" A brief pause, during which his eyes are fixed with agonised intensity on her head, a fact of which she is painfully conscious, though her own are riveted on the page before her. She nods spasmodically, and Reynold turns the leaf so hurriedly that it comes sliding down upon the flying hands, and has to be caught and replaced. As usual, displeasure at his own clumsiness makes him sullen and silent, and he stands back without a word when the performance is over. Mr. Masters thanks, applauds, talks a little

in the style which for the last forty years or so he has considered appropriate to the young ladies of his acquaintance, and finally says good night, and bows himself out of the room.

Mr. Hayes stands on the rug, and hides a little yawn behind his little hand. "Is Masters trying to make himself agreeable?" he asks. "Let me know if I am to look out for another housekeeper, Barbara."

Barbara has no brilliant reply ready. The hackneyed joke displeases her. As her uncle speaks, she can actually see Littlemere, the village where the small squire lives; a three-cornered green, tufted with rushy grass, with a cow and half-a-dozen geese on it; a few cottages, with their week's wash hung out to dry; a round pond, green with duckweed; a small alehouse; a couple of white, treeless roads, leading away into the world, but apparently serving only for the labourers who plod out

in the morning and home at night; an ugly little school-house of red brick and slate; and Littlemere Hall, square, white, and bare, set down like a large box in the middle of a dreary garden. She cannot help picturing herself there, with Mr. Masters, caught and prisoned; the idea is utterly absurd, but it is hideous, as hateful as if an actual hand were laid on her. She shrinks back and frowns. "You needn't get anybody just yet," she says.

"Very good," her uncle replies. "Give me a month's warning, that's all I ask." He yawns again, and looks at his watch. Reynold takes the hint, and his candle, and goes.

"Good riddance!" says the little man on the rug. "Of all the ill-mannered, cross-grained fellows I ever met, there goes the worst! A Rothwell! He's worse than any Rothwell, and not the genuine thing either! Can't he behave decently to my friends at

my own table? What does he mean by his confounded rudeness? Masters is a better man than ever he will be!"

Barbara shuts the piano, and lays her music straight. Poor little Barbara, trying with little soft speeches and judicious silences to steer her light-winged course among these angry men, is sorely perplexed sometimes. Now as Mr. Hayes mutters something about "an unlicked cub," she thinks it best to say, "Well, uncle, it isn't for very long. Mr. Harding will soon be going away."

"Yes, he'll soon be going away, and for good too! Never will *he* set foot inside Mitchelhurst Place again—I can tell him that! When he crosses the threshold he crosses it once for all. Never again—never again!"

This time Barbara, who is looking to the fastenings of the windows, is in no haste to speak. She feels as if she had been

conspiring with Harding, and, remembering their schemes for his return, her uncle's reiterated assurances ring oddly and mockingly in her ears. "When he crosses the threshold, he crosses it once for all." No, he does not! He is going away to work, he will come back and buy the Place of Mr. Croft, he will be living there for years and years when poor Uncle Hayes is dead and gone. And she, Barbara, has done it all. With a word and a look she has given a master to Mitchelhurst.

But, being a prudent girl, she merely says "Good night."

CHAPTER X.

AN AFTER-DINNER DISCUSSION.

Mr. Pryor, aloft in his pulpit in Mitchelhurst church, with a sounding-board suspended above his head, was preaching about the Amalekites to a small afternoon congregation. The Amalekites had happened to come out of that drawer in his writing-table of which Mr. Hayes had spoken, and perhaps did as well as anything else he could have found there. He was getting over the ground at a tolerable pace, in spite of an occasional stumble, and was too much absorbed in his manuscript to be disturbed by an active trade in marbles which was going on in the front row of the Sunday scholars. Indeed, to Mr. Pryor's short-sighted eyes,

his listeners were very nearly as remote as the Amalekites themselves.

Some of the straw-plaiting girls, whose fingers seemed restless during their Sunday idleness, were nudging and pulling each other, or turning the leaves of their hymn-books, or smoothing their dresses. A labourer here and there sat staring straight before him with a vacant gaze. A farmer's wife devoted the leisure moments to thinking out one or two practical matters, over which she frowned a little. The clerk, in his desk, attended officially to the Amalekites, but that was all.

Barbara and Reynold were apart from all the rest in the square, red-lined pew which had always belonged to the Rothwells. When they stood up their heads and Reynold's shoulders were visible, but during the sermon no one could see the occupants of the little inclosure except the preacher.

Reynold had established himself in a

corner, with his head slightly thrown back and his long legs stretched out. Barbara, a little way off, had her daintily-gloved hands folded on her lap, and sat with a demurely respectful expression while the voice above them sent a thin thread of denunciation through the drowsy atmosphere. Harding did not dislike it. Anything newer, more real, more living, would have seemed unsuited to the dusty marble figures which were the principal part of the congregation in that corner of the church. He had knelt down and stood up during the service, always with a sense of union between his own few years of life and the many years of which those monuments were memories ; and the old prayers, the "Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord," had fallen softly on his ears. Perils and dangers seemed so far from that sleepy little haven where he hoped to live his later days, and to come as a grey-haired

man, when all the storms and struggles were over, and hear those words Sunday after Sunday in that very pew. Barbara, from under her long lashes, stole a meditative, questioning glance at him while he was musing thus, and the glance lingered. The young fellow's head rested against the faded red baize, his eyes were half closed, his brows had relaxed, his mouth almost hinted a smile. He was not conscious of her scrutiny, and, seeing his face for the first time as a mere mask, she suddenly awoke to a perception of its beauty.

Overhead, it appeared that the Amalekites typified many evil things, and were by no means so utterly destroyed as they should have been. Mr. Pryor intended his warnings to be as emphatic as those of the fierce old prophet, and he drew a limp white finger down the faded page lest he should lose his place in the middle. Time had made the manuscript a little unfamiliar.

"My brethren," said the plaintive voice from beneath the sounding-board, "we must make terms—ahem!—we must *never* make terms with these relentless enemies who lie in wait for us as for the Israelites of old. Remember"—he turned a leaf and felt the next to ascertain if it were the last. It was not, and he hurried his exhortation a little, finding it long, yet afraid to venture on leaving anything out. Meanwhile a weary Sunday-school teacher awoke to sudden energy, plunged into the midst of the boys, and captured more marbles than he could hold, so that two or three escaped him and rolled down the aisle, amid a general manifestation of interest. The luckless teacher was young and bashful, and the rolling marbles seemed to him to fill the universe with reverberating echoes.

The vicar reached the goal at last, and gave out a hymn. Then the young people in the red-lined pew appeared once more,

Miss Strange singing, Reynold looking round to deepen and assure his recollection of that afternoon. When he found himself in the churchyard, passing under the black-boughed yews with Barbara, he broke the silence. "I shall be far enough away next Sunday."

It was so strange to think that by the next Sunday his work would have begun, the work which he so loathed and so desired. He had directed his letter to his uncle at his place a few miles out of town, where Mr. Harding always went from Saturday to Monday, and he remembered as he spoke that the old gentleman would have received it that morning. Reynold pictured a little triumph over his surrender, but he did not care. Something—it could hardly be Mr. Pryor's sermon—had sweetened his bitter soul, and he did not care. He felt as if that little corner of Mitchelhurst church had become an inalienable possession of his,

and he could enter into it at any time wherever he might chance to be.

Barbara was sympathetic, but slightly pre-occupied. If young Harding had understood women a little better he would certainly have perceived the pre-occupation, but as it was he only saw the sympathy. When they got back to the Place she delayed him in the garden, as if she too felt the charm of that peaceful afternoon and regretted its departure. They loitered to and fro on the wide gravel path, where grass and weeds encroached creepingly from the borders, and paused from time to time watching the sun as it went down. At last, when there was only a band of sulphur-coloured light on the horizon, Barbara turned away with a sigh.

Reynold did not understand her reluctance to go in. In truth she was uneasy at the thought of the long evening which her uncle and he must spend in the same room. Mr. Hayes had come down in a dangerous

mood that morning, not showing any special remembrance of Harding's offence of the night before, but seeming impartially displeased with everything and everybody. If ill-temper were actual fire, his conversation would have been all snaps and flashes like a fifth of November. Letters absorbed his attention at breakfast, but Barbara perceived that they only made him crosser than before. Happily, however, since a storm of rain hindered the morning's church-going, he went to his study to write his answers, and was seen no more till lunch-time, after which the weather cleared, and the young people walked off together to hear about the Amalekites. Reynold had no idea how anxiously Barbara had been sheltering him all day under her little wing, but now the sun was down, there was no help for it, they must go in and face the worst. She had paused and looked up at him as if she were about to say something before they

left the garden, but nothing came except the little sigh which he had heard.

Even when they went in, fate seemed a little to postpone the evil moment. Harding, coming down-stairs, saw a light shining through the door of a small room—the book-room, as it was sometimes called. A glance as he passed showed Barbara, with an arm raised above her head, taking a volume from the shelf. "Can I help you?" he asked, pausing in the doorway.

"Oh, thank you, but I think this is right." She examined the title-page. The window shutters were closed, the room was dusky with its lining of old brown leather bindings, and Barbara's candle was just a glow-worm glimmer of brightness in it. "You might put those others back for me if you would. I can manage to take them down, but it isn't so easy to put them up again."

Tall Reynold rendered the required service

quickly enough, while she laid the book she had chosen with some others already on the table, and began to dust them. It was an old-fashioned writing-table, with a multitude of little brass-handled drawers. The young man took hold of one of these brass handles, and noticed its rather elaborate workmanship. "Look inside," said the girl, as she laid her duster down.

The drawer was full of yellowing papers, old bills, and miscellaneous scraps of various kinds. She pulled out a few, and they turned them over in the gleam of candlelight. "Butcher, Christmas, 1811," said Barbara, "and here is a glazier's bill. What have you got?"

"To sinking and bricking new well, 32 ft. deep," Reynold replied. "It is in 1816. To making new pump, 38 ft. long."

"Why, that must be the old pump by the stables," said Barbara. "Look at this receipt, 'for work Don accorden to Bill?'"

"There seem to be plenty of them. Are the other drawers full too?"

"Yes, I think so. You had better take one as a souvenir."

"No, thank you." He smiled as he thrust the bills he held down among the dusty bundles in the drawer, and brushed his finger tips fastidiously. "Souvenirs ought to be characteristic. A receipted bill would be a very respectable souvenir, but I'm afraid it would convey a false impression of the Rothwells."

She looked away, a little perplexed and dissatisfied. It seemed to her that the future master of Mitchelhurst should not talk in that fashion of his own people, and she did not understand that the slight bitterness of speech was merely the outcome of a life of discontent. He hardly knew how to speak otherwise. "I suppose they would have paid everybody if they hadn't had misfortunes," she said.

"No doubt. We would most of us pay our bills if we had nothing else to do with the money."

"Well," Barbara declared with a blush, "the next Rothwell will pay *his* bills, I know."

"We'll hope so." His smile apparently emboldened her, for she looked up at him. "Mr. Harding," she began.

"Well?"

She put her hand to her mouth with an irresolute gesture, softly touching her red lips. "Oh—nothing!" she said.

"Nothing?" he questioned. But at that moment there was a call. "Barbara! Barbara! are you stopping to *write* those books?"

She turned swiftly, caught them up and was gone, sending an answering cry of "Coming, uncle—coming!" before her.

Reynold lingered a little before he followed her, to wonder what that something was that was nothing.

When he went in he found Mr. Hayes and Barbara both industriously occupied with their reading, after the fashion of a quiet Sunday in the country. He took up the first volume that came to hand, threw himself into a chair, and remained for a considerable time frowning and musing over the unread page. Mr. Hayes turned his pages with wearisome regularity, but after a while Barbara laid her *Good Words* on her lap and gazed fixedly at the window, where little could be seen but the reflection of the lamp in the outer darkness. The silence of the room seeming to have become accustomed to this change of attitude, the slightest possible movement of her head brought Reynold within range. He moved, and she was looking at the window, from which she turned quite naturally, and met his glance. Her fingers were playing restlessly with her little gold cross, and Harding said, "Your talisman!"

No word had been spoken for so long that the brief utterance came with a kind of startling distinctness.

"My talisman still, thanks to you," Barbara replied.

The absurdity of his misfortune was a little forgotten, and the fact of his service remained, so Harding almost smiled as he rejoined—

"I say 'thanks to it' for my introduction."

Mr. Hayes knitted his brows, and looked from one to the other with bright, bead-like eyes. When, a minute later, a maid came to the door, and asked to speak to Miss Strange, he waited till his niece was gone, and then sharply demanded—

"What was that about a talisman?"

"That little cross Miss Strange wears. She calls that her talisman."

"Indeed! Why that particular cross?"

"It belonged to her godmother, I believe," said Harding.

The old gentleman stared, and then considered a little.

"Her godmother, eh? Why," he began to laugh, "her godmother—what does Barbara know about her?"

"I think she said she was named after her——"

"So she was."

"And that her mother told her she was the most beautiful woman she ever knew——"

"That's true enough. She *was* beautiful, and clever, and accomplished, no doubt about that. One ought to speak kindly of the dead, they say. Well, she was beautiful, and if ever there was a selfish, heartless coquette——"

"Hey!" said Reynold, opening his eyes. "Is that speaking kindly of the dead?"

"Very kindly," with emphasis.

"But Miss Strange's mother——"

"Well, I should think she must have begun to find her friend out before she died.

I don't know, though; Mrs. Strange isn't over wise, she may contrive to believe in her still. I wonder what Strange would say, if he ever said anything! So that is Barbara's talisman! Not much *virtue* in it, anyhow; but I dare say it will do just as well. There have been some queer folks canonised before now."

He ended with a chuckling little laugh. Evidently he knew enough of the earlier Barbara to see something irresistibly comic in the girl's tenderness for this little relic of the past.

Harding was grimly silent. Barbara's fancy might be foolish, but since she cherished it, he hated to hear this ugly little mockery of her treasure, and he had found a half-acknowledged satisfaction in the remembrance that the little cross was a link between himself and her. Now, when she came into the room again, and Mr. Hayes compressed his lips, and glanced from the

little ornament to his visitor, and then to his book again, in stealthy enjoyment of his joke, the other felt as if there were something sinister in the token. He wished Barbara would not caress it as she stood by the fire. He would have liked to throw it down and tread it under foot.

There might have been some malignant influence in the air that day, for Barbara will wonder as long as she lives what made her two companions insist on talking politics at dinner. She did not like people to talk politics. She had never looked out the word in the dictionary, and perhaps she might not have objected to a lofty discussion of "the science of government, that part of ethics which consists in the regulation and government of a nation or state." She looked upon talking politics as a masculine diversion, which consisted in bandying violent assertions about Mr. Gladstone. It never led, of course, to any change of

opinion, but it generally made people raise their voices, and interrupt one another, and get red in the face. As far as her opportunities of observation went, Barbara had judged pretty correctly.

Her uncle held what he called his political creed solely as a means of enjoyable argument. He considered himself an advanced Liberal, but he had so many whims and hobbies that he was the most uncertain of supporters. No one held his views, and if, by some inconceivable chance, he had convinced an adversary, he would have been very uncomfortable. He would have felt himself crowded out of his position, and would have retired immediately to less accessible ground, and defied his disciple to climb up after him. When he had arranged his opinions he was obliged to find ingenious methods of escaping their consequences. For instance, with some whimsical recollection of the one passion of his life, he chose

to hold advanced views about Woman's Rights, which disgusted his country neighbours. Woman was, in every respect but physical strength, the natural equal of man. She was to be emancipated, to vote, to take her place in Church and State—when Mr. Hayes was dead. At present she was evidently dwarfed and degraded by long ages of man's oppressive rule, and needed careful education, and a considerable lapse of time, to raise her to the position that was hers by right. Meanwhile she must be governed, not as an inferior, on that point he spoke very strongly indeed, but as a minor not yet qualified to enter into possession of her inheritance, and he exerted himself, in rather a high-handed fashion, to keep her in the proper path. The woman of the future was to do exactly what she pleased, but the woman of the present—Barbara—was to do as she was told, and not talk about what she did not understand.

By this arrangement Mr. Hayes was able to rule his womankind, and to deny the superiority of his masculine acquaintances.

It was precisely this question that came up at dinner-time. Harding had no real views on political matters; he was simply a Conservative by nature. He had none of the daring energy which snatches chances in periods of change; his instinct was that of self-defence, to hold rather than to gain; to gather even the rags of the past about him, with the full consciousness that they were but rags, rather than to throw himself into the battle of the present. It was true that he was going to work for Mitchelhurst and Barbara, but the double impulse had been needed to conquer his shrinking pride. That a man should be hustled by a mixed and disorderly crowd was bad enough, but that a woman should step down into it, should demand work, should make speeches, and push her way to the polling-booth, was

in Harding's eyes something hideously degrading and indecent. As to the equality of the sexes, that was rubbish. Man was to rule, and woman to maintain an ideal of purity and sweetness. Education, beyond the simple old-fashioned limits, tended only to unsex her.

He would have opposed Mr. Hayes's theories at any time, but they cut him to the quick just then, when he had felt the grace of womanhood, when a woman had passed into his life and transformed it. The old man was airily disposing of the destinies of the race in centuries to come, the young man was fighting for his own little future. He could not rule the world. Let it roar and hurry as it would, but never dare to touch his wife and home. What did the man mean by uttering his hateful doctrines in Barbara's hearing? Her bright eyes came and went between the speakers, and Reynold longed to order her away,

to shut her up in some safe place apart, where only he might approach her.

He need not have been anxious. There was no touch of ambition in the girl's tender feminine nature to respond to her uncle's arguments. She did not want to vote, and wondered why women should ever wish to be doctors or—or—anything. Her eager glances betokened uneasiness rather than interest. Indeed the inferior being, scenting danger, had tried to turn the conversation before the terrible question of Woman's Rights had been mentioned at all. She had endeavoured to talk about a lawn-tennis ground rather than the aspect of Irish affairs. Harding did not know much about lawn-tennis, but he was quite ready to talk about it, just as he would have talked about crewel-work, if she had seemed to wish it. Mr. Hayes, however, pooh-poohed the little attempt at peace.

"What is the good of planning the

ground now?" he said. "And who cares for lawn-tennis?"

"I do," said the girl. "It's much more amusing than talking about Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Parnell."

"That's all you know about it," her uncle retorted. "Now if you had been educated—"

"Oh yes, of course," she replied, with desperate pertness. "You are always talking about the woman of the future—I dare say she will *like* to see people make themselves hot and disagreeable, arguing about Ireland." She made a droll little face of disgust. "Well, she may, but I don't!"

"Perhaps the woman of the future will be hot and disagreeable too," Harding suggested.

"*You* might not find her agreeable," said Mr. Hayes drily. "She would be able to expose the fallacy of your views pretty clearly, I fancy."

"Well," Barbara struck in hurriedly, amazed at her own boldness, "we get hot enough over tennis sometimes, but nobody is ever so cross over that, as men are when they argue."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Hayes. "To think that women, who rightfully should share man's most advanced attainments and aspirations—" and off he went at a canter over the beaten ground of many previous discussions.

Barbara looked from him to young Harding. His dark eyes were ominous, he was only waiting, breathlessly, till Mr. Hayes should be compelled to pause for breath. "I hope you don't mean to imply, sir—" he began, and Barbara perceived that not only had she failed to avert a collision, but that, by her thoughtless mention of the woman of the future, she had introduced the precise subject on which the two men were most furiously at variance. Thenceforward

she merely glanced from one to the other as the noisy battle raged, watching in dumb suspense as one might watch the rising of a tide. Mr. Hayes had been thoroughly cross all day, and had not forgiven Reynold's rudeness of the evening before. Under cover of his argument he was saying all the irritating things he could think of, while Harding's harsher voice broke through his shrill-toned talk with rough contradictions.

After a time Barbara was obliged to leave them, and she went back to the drawing-room with a sinking heart. She had been uneasy the night before, but that was nothing to this. How earnestly she wished Mr. Pryor back again! She was pitiless, she would have flung the gentle flaccid little clergyman between the angry combatants without a moment's hesitation, if she could only have brought him there by the force of her desire. Happily for Mr. Pryor, however, he was safe in his study,

putting away the Amalekites at the bottom of the drawer, till their turn should come again.

At last when Barbara was in despair at the lateness of the hour, she sent one of the maids to tell the gentlemen that coffee was ready, and crept into the hall behind her messenger to hear the result. At the opening of the door there was a stormy clamour, and then a sudden silence. It was closed again, and the maid returned. "Master says, Miss, will you send it in?" The last hope was gone, she could do nothing more but pour out the coffee, and wish with all her heart it were an opiate.

She was as firmly convinced as Reynold himself of the vast superiority of men, but these intellectual exercises of theirs upset her dreadfully. If only it had been Mr. Scarlett! He had a light laughing way of holding her uncle at arm's length, avowing himself a Conservative simply as a matter of taste, and fighting for the old

fashions which Mr. Hayes denounced, because he wanted something left that he could make verses about. Barbara, as she stood pensively on the rug, recalled one occasion when Adrian Scarlett put forward his plea. He was sitting on the sill of the open window, with the evening sky behind his head, and while he talked he drew down a long, blossomed spray of pale French honeysuckle. "Oh yes, I'm a Conservative," he said; "there are lots of things I want to conserve—all the picturesqueness, old streets, and signs, and manor-houses, old customs, village greens, fairs, thatched cottages, little courtesying maidens, old servants, and men with scythes and flails, instead of your new machines." She remembered how Mr. Hayes had interrupted him with a contemptuous inquiry whether there was not as much poetry to be found on one side as on the other. "Oh yes," he had assented, idly swinging his foot,

"as fine on your side no doubt, or finer. You have the Marseillaise style of thing to quicken one's pulses. Yes, and I came across a bit the other day, declaring—

> "'*Que la Liberté sainte est la seule déesse,*
> *Que l'on n'adore que debout.*'"

The words, uttered in the sudden fulness of his clear, rounded tones, seemed to send a great wave of impulse through the quiet room. Barbara could recall the sharp "Well, then?" with which Mr. Hayes received it.

"Ah, but not for me," young Scarlett had answered. "You don't expect me to write that kind of thing? It isn't in me. No, I want to rhyme about some little picture in an old-fashioned setting—Pamela, or Dorothy, or—or Ursula, walking between clipped hedges, or looking at an old sundial, or stopping by a basin rimmed with mossy stone to feed the gold fish. Or dreaming —and she must not be a Girton young

woman—I couldn't imagine a Girton young woman's dreams!"

And so the argument ended in laughter. If only it could have been Adrian Scarlett instead of Reynold Harding in the dining-room that night! Barbara's apprehensions would all have vanished in a moment. But Mr. Scarlett was gone, ("He *might* have said good-bye," thought Barbara,) and the pleasant time was gone with him. The window was closed and shuttered, and the honeysuckle, a tangle of grey stalks, shivered in the wind outside.

She tried to amuse herself with *Good Words* again, but failed. Then she went to the piano, but had no better success there. She was listening with such strained attention, that to her ears the music was only distracting and importunate noise. As a last resource she bethought her of a half-finished novel which she had left in her bed-room. She had not intended to go on

with it till Monday, but she *would*, and she ran up-stairs with guilty eagerness to fetch it.

She was coming back along the passage with the book in her hand, when she heard the opening and shutting of doors below, and the quick fall of steps. In another moment Reynold Harding came springing up the wide stairs to where she stood. There was a lamp at the head of the staircase, and as he passed out of the dusk into its light, she could see his angry eyes, and she knew the veins which stood out upon his forehead, looking as if the blood in them were black.

He saw her just before he reached the top, and stopped short. For a moment neither spoke, then he drew a long breath, and laid his hand upon the balustrade.

"Miss Strange," he said, "I'm going away."

Barbara hardly knew what she had ex-

pected or feared, but this took her by surprise.

"Going? Not now?" she exclaimed in amazement.

"Not to-night—it is too late. I *must* stop for the night. I can't help myself. But the first thing to-morrow morning."

"Oh, why?"

"I can't stay under the roof of a man who has insulted me as your uncle has done. It is impossible that we should meet again," said Reynold. His speech seemed to escape in fierce little jets of repressed wrath. "I'm not accustomed—I ought never to have come here!"

"Oh!" cried Barbara, in a tone of pained reproach.

He was silent, looking fixedly at her. The meaning of what he had said, and the fatal meaning of what he had done, came upon him, arresting him in the midst of his passion. All his fire seemed suddenly

to die down to grey ashes. What madness had possessed him?

They faced each other in the pale circle of lamplight, which trembled a little on the broad, white stairs. Reynold, stricken and dumb, grasped the balustrade with tightening fingers. Barbara leaned against the white-panelled wall. She was the first to speak.

"Oh!" she said in a low voice. "That *you* should be driven out of Mitchelhurst!"

"Don't!" cried he. "God! it was my own fault!"

"What was it? What did you quarrel about?"

"Do I know?" Reynold demanded. "Ask him! Perhaps he can remember some of the idiotic jangling. Why did we begin? Why did we go on? I don't believe hell itself could be more wearisome. I was sick to death of it, and yet something seemed to goad me on—I couldn't give in! It was my infernal temper, I suppose."

"Oh I am so sorry!" Barbara whispered.

"He shouldn't have spoken to me as he did, when I was his guest at his own table," young Harding continued. "But after all, he is an old man, I ought to have remembered that. Well, it's too late; it's all over now!"

"But is it too late? Can't anything be done?"

He almost smiled at the feminine failure to realise that the night's work was more than a tiff which might be made up and forgotten.

"Kiss and make friends—eh?" he said. "Will you run and fetch your uncle?"

The leaden little jest was uttered so miserably that Barbara only sighed in answer.

"No," said the young man, "it's all over. Even if I could apologise—and I can't—I couldn't sit at his table again. It wouldn't be possible. No, I must go!"

"And you are sorry you ever came!"

"Don't remind me of that! I'm just as sorry I came here as that I ever came into the world at all."

The old clock in the dusky hall below struck ten slow strokes.

"This will be good-night and good-bye," said Harding. "I shall be gone before you are down in the morning."

Even as he spoke he was thinking how completely his bitter folly had exiled him from her presence.

"You are going home?"

"Home? Well, yes, I suppose so. By the way, I don't know that I shall go home to-morrow. I may have to stay another day in Mitchelhurst. That depends —I shall see when the morning comes. Your uncle's jurisdiction doesn't extend beyond the grounds of the Place, I suppose. I won't trespass, he may be very sure of that, and I won't stay in the neighbourhood any longer than I can help. Only,

you see, this is rather a sudden change of plans."

"I am so sorry," the girl repeated. "I hate to think of your going away like this. I'm ashamed!"

"No! no! I'm rightly served, though you needn't tell Mr. Hayes I said so. I was fool enough to let my temper get the upper hand, and I must pay the penalty. How I *could* be such an inconceivable idiot—but that's neither here nor there. It was my own fault, and the less said about it the better."

Barbara shook her head.

"No, it was my fault."

This time Harding really smiled, drearily enough, but still it was a smile.

"Yours?" he said. "That never occurred to me. How do you make it out?"

"Well," she said, looking down, and tracing a joint of the stone with the tip of her little embroidered slipper, "it was partly my fault, anyhow."

This "partly" seemed to point to something definite.

"How do you mean?" he asked, looking curiously at her.

"I knew he was cross," she said. "I knew it this morning as soon as he came down, and he generally gets worse and worse all day. He isn't often out of temper like that—only now and then. I dare say he will be all right to-morrow, or perhaps the day after."

"That's a little late for me!" said Harding.

"So you see it *was* my fault. I ought to have told you."

"Well, perhaps if you had, I might have been a trifle more on my guard. I don't know, I'm sure. Yes, I wish you had happened to warn me! But you mustn't reproach yourself, Miss Strange, it wasn't your fault. You didn't know what I was, you couldn't be expected to think of it."

"But I *did* think of it!" Barbara cried remorsefully.

"You did?"

"Yes, I was thinking of it all day. Oh how I *wish* I had done it! But I wasn't sure you would like it—I didn't know. I thought perhaps it might seem"—she faltered—"might seem as if I thought that you——"

"I see!" Reynold answered in his harshest voice. "I needn't have told you just now that I had a devil of a temper!"

Barbara drew herself up against the wall with her head thrown back, and gazed blankly at him.

"Oh, don't be afraid!" he said with a laugh. "I'm not going to *hit* you!"

"Don't talk like that!" she cried. "Oh! there's uncle coming!" and turning she fled back to her own room. Harding heard the steps below, and he also went off, not quite so hurriedly, but with long strides,

and vanished into the shadows. The innocent cause of this alarm crossed the hall, from the drawing-room to the study, banging the doors after him, and the lamplight fell on the deserted stairs.

Harding struck a light and flung himself into a chair. Barbara's words and his own mocking laughter seemed still to be in the air about him. The silence and loneliness bewildered him, he could not realise tha his chance of speech had escaped him, and that Barbara's entreaty must remain unanswered. Her timid self-reproach had stabbed him to the heart. That the poor little girl should have trembled and been silent, lest he should speak harshly, and then that she should blame herself so bitterly for her cowardice—it was a sudden revelation to Reynold of the ugliness of those black moods of his. One might have pictured the evil power broken by the shock of this discovery and leaving shame-

stricken patience in its place, or, at least, one might have imagined strenuous resolutions for the days to come. But Reynold's very tenderness was mixed with wrath; he cursed the something in himself, yet not himself, which had frightened Barbara, he could not feel that *he* was answerable. That she, of all the world, should judge him so, filled his soul with a burning sense of wrong.

"How *could* you think it?" he pleaded with her in his thoughts, "my dear, how *could* you think it?" And yet he did not blame her. Ah God! what a bitter, miserable wretch he had been his whole life through! Why had no woman ever taught him how to be gentle and good? He blamed neither Barbara nor himself, but a cruel fate.

It was not till late, when he had collected his things, and made all ready for his departure in the morning, that he remembered that he would not see her again, that he

absolutely could not so much as speak a word to make amends. He must cross the threshold of the old house as early as he possibly could, his angry pride would not allow him a moment's delay, and what chance was there that she would be up and dressed by then? It was maddening to think of the long slow hours which they would pass under the same roof, each hour gliding away with its many minutes. And in one minute he could say so much, if but one minute were granted him! "But it won't be," he said sullenly, as he lay down till the dawn should come, "it isn't likely." And he ground his teeth together at the remembrance of the many minutes spent in wrangling with Mr. Hayes, while Barbara waited alone.

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